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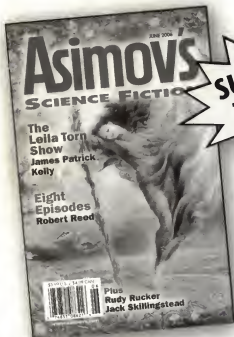
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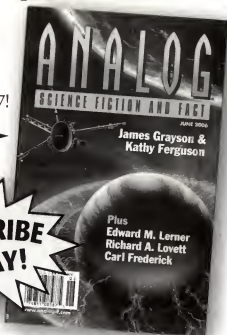
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Next Issue on Sale June 27, 2006

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Asimov's Science Fiction: ISSN 1065-2698. Vol. 30, No. 7. Whole No. 366, July 2006. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription \$43.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$53.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2006 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industriel, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4.

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MOON DAY

Howard Waldrop, in his story "Do Ya, Do Ya Wanna Dance?" (*Asimov's*, August 1988) reminds us that in 1969 Richard Nixon took office and the Vietnam war raged. *Abbey Road* was released late in the year, Woodstock occurred that summer, and the disastrous Altamont Race Track concert took place in December. *Slaughterhouse Five* was published, Charles Manson, The Weathermen, The Black Panthers, and NOW were in the news, and, on July 20, we landed on the Moon. Later in the story, which is about the twentieth reunion of the class of '69, he adds "PS: Nobody's been to the Moon in sixteen years."

I remember celebrating that hot summer night in 1969 with my family. I baked a chocolate cake, and we stuck my brother's model of the *Eagle*—the lunar landing module—and a couple of plastic astronauts on the top. I still have the photo. My mother took another picture of her four daughters lying on the floor watching TV as the *Eagle* landed. Nothing shows up on the screen, but I've always been struck by the image of my three-year-old sister because she fits on my mother's king-size pillow.

Sometime around the twenty-fifth anniversary of the moon landing, I decided to institute an annual celebration. My actual holiday is fluid. Depending upon my schedule, it shifts from the day the *Eagle* landed to the day Neil Armstrong first stepped onto the surface of the

Moon. In the beginning, I always baked a chocolate cake to celebrate the day. I'd bring the cake and appropriate decorative plastic figurines to work and hold a party in my office.

Once my older, and very opinionated, daughter gained a say in the proceedings, I had to alter the festivities slightly. Naturally, she wanted cake, too. For some reason, though, she and her father are unduly fond of lemon cake (they even think this cake is a legitimate option on Valentine's Day! Thankfully, I had a second child, and, although she's only three, she votes firmly for chocolate.)

Fortunately, I hit on a very happy solution. I bake what I call my "compromise cake." While my first Moon cake was made from scratch, these days I never seem able to find time for such creativity. I've turned this problem to my advantage, however. I use two boxes of cake mix—one lemon and one chocolate. I make two cakes, and each cake has a lemon layer and a chocolate layer. I cover the first layer with chocolate frosting, then ice the sides with lemon. I use the rest of the lemon frosting to draw a generous half moon on top of the cake and fill in the other side with chocolate frosting. If I'm feeling really ambitious, I draw little moons around the sides of the cakes. This solution results in a cake for the office and one for home. Some wag at work is sure to helpfully inform me that I should have made cheese-

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cake, but my patience for that joke wears thinner every year.

In 1911, when my dad's father was six, he and his family immigrated to Springhill, Nova Scotia. Only one person in town owned a car. My grandfather spoke proudly of having lived to see the awesome technical revolution that spanned from that single car to a man walking on the Moon. I mentioned this comment to my twelve-year-old the other day in the middle of a discussion about the fast pace of change. Her father quipped, "And if you live long enough, perhaps you and *your* sister will see someone walk there, too." The latest papers bring news of further cuts to NASA's budget. Compelling arguments are made for why we should focus our attention, and most of our money, on education, healthcare, levees, and other serious problems here at home.

Still, I want to celebrate the science and the technology, the scientists and the engineers, the spirit and the adventure, and the brave astronauts and test pilots who made the initial space program possible. I want to celebrate the men and women in the public and private sectors that continue to work on space exploration. The

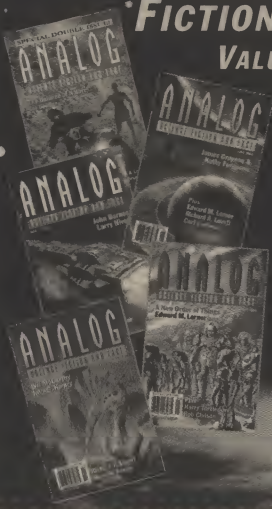
current cover is part of that celebration. Alan Bean, the captain of the second manned mission to the Moon, and the third person to walk there, painted this portrait of Charlie Duke, a retired brigadier general, USAF, and the lunar module pilot of *Apollo 16*. Captain Bean also spent fifty-nine days as the spacecraft commander of the second manned mission to Skylab 3. He retired from NASA in 1981 and took up a new career as an artist. We're proud to have the chance to bring one of his visions of the Moon to you.

You can help me create a holiday that celebrates the indomitable aspect of human nature that sent men to the Moon and continues to send brave men and women into space. Join me on July 20 or 21. You don't even have to support the space program to have fun on Moon Day or to recognize this tremendous achievement. Anyone can read a science fiction story, bake my Moon cake, or eat Chinese Moon cakes, or MoonPies, or even cheese-cake. And remember, in three years, the class of '69 will hold its fortieth reunion.

PS: Nobody's been to the Moon in thirty-three years. ○



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THE THUMB ON THE DINOSAUR'S NOSE

Perhaps it's only a coincidence. But something about having the World Science Fiction Convention take place in Glasgow, Scotland, seems to bring to life the fascination with dinosaurs that I've had, on and off, since childhood. After the first Glasgow convention in 1995 I went to nearby Edinburgh and *bought* a dinosaur. And last summer, just before the second Glasgow event, I visited a London park where the earliest and strangest life-sized reconstructions of dinosaurs ever made have been on display for a century and a half.

I wrote about my Edinburgh dinosaur in a column called "The Dinosaur in the Living Room" that was published in this magazine in 1996. "The dinosaur," I said then, "is a fairly small one, as dinosaurs go. I suppose it was about the size of a cat during its pre-extinct days, and not a very large cat at that. Its name is *Mesosaurus brasiliensis*, which is not anything I would want to call a cat. . . . As I said, not one of your truly enormous dinosaurs. Distinctly sub-brontosauran, in fact: an array of delicate and elegant reptilian-looking bones still contained in the stone slab in which their fossilization had taken place, a couple of geological epochs ago. The slab, maybe two feet by three feet by three inches, was neatly displayed in the middle of the shop window, with the usual fossil-shop array of ammonites and trilobites and such deployed around it."

We bought it. We keep it in our living room. I'm probably not the only science fiction writer who has a dinosaur in his living room (Alan Dean Foster, what about you?), but I don't currently know of any others.

As for last summer's Glasgow-Dinosaur connection, it came about because I decided, finally, to visit Crystal Palace Park, a twenty-minute train ride south of London, where fabulous dinosaur models that I had known about for many years, but never seen, are to be found. The Crystal Palace was a spectacular structure of glass and iron, 1851 feet long, 456 feet wide, and 66 feet high, that was erected in London's Hyde Park in 1851 to house the Great Exhibition, the first of what we now call World's Fairs. Thirteen thousand exhibitors filled its eight hundred thousand square feet of display space with all manner of displays of arts and science. When the fair closed, the entire gigantic building was dismantled and re-erected in the London suburb of Sydenham to be the central feature of a huge amusement park. The park would also include a cricket field, a race track, a concert hall, a zoo, a boating lake—and an artificial island populated by life-sized replicas of dinosaurs.

We modern folk, familiar with dinosaurs from childhood on, accustomed to encountering them in museums and movies and theme parks and taking them pretty much for granted by now, can barely comprehend the impact that

these prehistoric monsters had on the Victorian imagination. In 1854, when the new Crystal Palace Park opened to the public, the word "dinosaur" itself was only twelve years old. Giant fossilized bones had been turning up in the course of construction work ever since the Renaissance, but it was not until the early nineteenth century that naturalists realized that they belonged to some sort of colossal reptilian creatures no longer to be found on Earth. One fossil, unearthed in England in 1822, was given the name of *Megalosaurus*, "giant lizard." Soon after came one that was dubbed *Iguanodon*, "Iguana tooth," because of the resemblance of its teeth to those of the familiar tropical lizards. But its discoverer calculated, comparing the size of the fossil teeth to those of the living animals, that the *Iguanodon* must have been seventy-five to one hundred feet long.

It was already dimly apparent that these creatures had been structurally different from modern reptiles, but it remained for the British anatomist Richard Owen to show the extent of that difference. About 1840 he began a study of the bones found thus far and concluded from their pelvic structure that they must have walked upright on four legs, in contrast to existing lizards and crocodiles, whose legs extend sideways and permit only a crawling or scampering kind of motion. This difference, and their great size, Owen wrote in 1842, "will, it is presumed, be deemed sufficient ground for establishing a distinct tribe or suborder of Saurian Reptiles, for which I would propose the name of *Dinosauria*." That word came from the Greek *deinos*, "terrible," and *sauros*, "lizard," though

Owen made it clear that he regarded the great beasts as belonging to a group quite separate from modern lizards.

The world's first wave of dinosaur mania, thus touched off by Owen, brought forth from British artists a host of attempted reconstructions of the extinct monsters. Most of these were done with great care, under scientific supervision, but only a few fossilized dinosaur bones had been discovered as yet, and the drawings and paintings that resulted were wildly fanciful things that depicted the dinosaurs as gaudy dragons of a grand and glorious strangeness. (You can find reproductions of some of these wonderful early drawings in a delightful book called *Scenes from Deep Time*, by Martin J.S. Rudwick, which the University of Chicago Press published in 1992.)

The planners of Crystal Palace Park thought it would be a fine idea to include a dinosaur display among its attractions, and, in 1852, the sculptor and illustrator Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins was duly hired to create it. Waterhouse Hawkins, who had had extensive experience in scientific illustration, would work in collaboration with Richard Owen to replicate not only all known dinosaurs for the park, but also such other antediluvian creatures as mastodons, giant ground sloths, and the precursors of tapirs and camels.

He set up a workshop on the park grounds and began by making sketches and then scale models of his subjects—no simple task, even with Owen's help, because they were working only from scattered bones, not complete skeletons. Small wonder, then, that the results were as much fantasy as

science. Nevertheless the scale models took shape, and from them came the full-sized sculptures, which were built of brick and concrete over iron frames. Some of them called for thirty tons of clay. Enabling these behemoths to stand on their four legs alone, with no other props, was a formidable technical challenge. "In the instance of the Iguanodon," Waterhouse Hawkins wrote, "[it] is not less than building a house on four columns, as the quantities of which the standing Iguanodon is composed, consist of 4 iron columns 9 feet long by 7 inches diameter, 600 bricks, 650 5-inch half-round drain tiles, 900 plain tiles, 38 casks of cement, 90 casks of broken stone, making a total of 640 bushels of artificial stone. These, with 100 feet of iron hooping and 20 feet of cube inch bar, constitute the bones, sinews, and muscles of this large model, the largest of which there is any record of a casting being made."

Waterhouse Hawkins's stupendous Iguanodon was to be the centerpiece of this phenomenal stone menagerie, and accordingly it attracted much attention while it was under construction. You may wonder why this fairly obscure dinosaur and not one of the species that every small child is familiar with today was chosen as the focal point of the display, rather than such showy items as a Brontosaurus, a Tyrannosaurus, or a Stegosaurus. The answer is that those awesome beasts were all still unknown in 1852; they were not to be discovered until decades later, when such great American dinosaur hunters as Othniel Charles Marsh and Edward Drinker Cope began roaming the immense Jurassic bone-fields of Colorado and Wyoming. So it

was the Iguanodon around which most of the early Crystal Palace publicity was centered.

The most ingenious stroke of promotional activity with which the Crystal Palace Company stoked public interest in the dinosaur project was a formal dinner for twenty-one scientists that took place *inside* the full-sized mold from which the concrete Iguanodon was to be cast. The invitation read, "Mr. B. Waterhouse Hawkins solicits the honour of Professor——'s company at dinner, *in the Iguanodon*, on the 31st of December, 1853, at four P.M." A woodcut published in *The Illustrated London News* not long afterward brings the event to life for us: the Iguanodon mold, open along the back from the nape of the monster's neck to the curve of its rump, is set upon a wooden platform under a cloth tent on which the names of Cuvier, Mantell, Buckland, and Owen, the scientists most prominent in the rediscovery of the dinosaurs, are inscribed. Within the mold Waterhouse Hawkins and his twenty-one guests, resplendently dressed, are seated around a long table with Owen, the only living member of that quartet of famed paleontologists, at its head. At the end of the meal, the newspaper tells us, "the usual routine of loyal toasts were duly given and responded to"—with reference being made to the "great interest evinced and approbation expressed" by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert on their recent visit to the site.

Another contemporary woodcut from the *Illustrated London News*—you'll find it reproduced in *Scenes from Deep Time*—provides a picture of "The Extinct Animals Model-Room, at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham." It is a scene out of a night-

mare. The Iguanodon, massive and implacable, stares straight out at the reader, with a ferociously toothy companion crouching at its side and three or four others visible in the shadows behind, while the diminutive figure of a workman below the Iguanodon provides a sense of scale.

On the day in 1854 when Queen Victoria herself opened Crystal Palace Park to the public, forty thousand people were in atten-

dance, traveling out from London aboard special excursion trains to see these monsters of the past with their own eyes. I'll take you on a tour of them myself in next issue's piece, and tell you why it is that New York City's Central Park does not have a similar exhibit created by Waterhouse Hawkins today—and I'll also explain the meaning of the curious title at the head of this column. ○

IN MEMORIAM

Octavia E. Butler

1947–2006

Octavia Estelle Butler died suddenly on February 24, 2006. With her passing, the field lost one of its most extraordinary authors, and *Asimov's* lost a piece of its heart. Ms. Butler wrote very few short stories, and we only had the chance to publish two of them, but what tremendous stories they were. "Speech Sounds" (Mid-December 1983) and "Bloodchild" (June 1984) brought her three of her four major science fiction awards.

The night she won her first Hugo was a memorable one for me. During the ceremony, in a row near the front of the audience, I sat alongside Ms. Butler. Her agent both then and now, Merrilee Heifetz, sat to her right, and Shawna McCarthy, the *Asimov's* editor who published both stories, sat beside Ms. Heifetz. When she won the Hugo award for her short story "Speech Sounds," Octavia Butler became the first African American woman to receive the coveted fiction award. That night, Shawna McCarthy became the first woman to win the professional editor Hugo as well. It was a thrilling evening of empowerment and joy. The following year, Ms. Butler went on to win the Nebula and the Hugo for the magnificent novelette, "Bloodchild." Wayne D. Barlowe's beautiful cover art provided the story with a haunting illustration. A framed poster made from the painting hangs in my office to this day.

Ms. Butler's later awards included a Nebula for her novel *Parable of the Talents*, a lifetime achievement award from PEN Center West, and the Langston Hughes Medal from the City College of New York. In 1995, she became the first science fiction writer to receive a MacArthur "genius" fellowship.

Although she leaves us with a profound legacy, Octavia E. Butler's unique voice will be deeply missed.

—Sheila Williams

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

Therese Littleton

PRESERVING THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE — AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF THE SCIENCE FICTION MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME

By day, Therese Littleton is an associate curator at the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame. By night, she is a freelance writer and part-time science teacher.

I'm walking through the galleries of the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame on a Tuesday morning. Down in the Fantastic Voyages gallery, expert installers are gently securing the only existing model of the Death Star from *Star Wars* into its cradle. Over at the new SETI display, curators are discussing the finer points of an explanatory text plaque. Upstairs, technicians have fine-tuned the sound and light levels in the Homeworld Gallery to highlight the huge video-screen globe that takes center stage.

It's another day at the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame.

I have what some might consider the best job in the galaxy. My job title is "Manager, SFM Programs," which means I coordinate the exhibits and activities of this amazing museum. The team I work with is small, but packed with serious science fiction credibility. Jacob McMurray is our senior curator, Leslie Howle handles educational outreach, and Brooks Peck works on curatorial, technology, and education

projects. All four of us are lifelong science fiction fans, dedicated to demonstrating the genre's coolest ideas to the world.

As an insider, it's impossible for me to be objective about the museum, considering how much time and effort I've put into it, so I hope you'll pardon my cheerful tone. This article isn't meant as an ad for the museum; rather, I wanted to reveal some of the philosophy behind our exhibits.

SFM FAQ, Part One:

Q: Can you get me a job at SFM? I am smarter/more knowledgeable than you and I would make an excellent curator/researcher/consultant.

A: Alas, no. Although your qualifications are impeccable, we're not in hiring mode at the moment. Keep an eye on our web site for opportunities (www.sfhomeworld.org).

The Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame is in Seattle, a very skiffy town. Besides being home to a plethora of brilliant science fiction writers, we've got a retro-futuristic monorail, a Space Needle, and more computer geeks than we know what to do with. SFM is in the same build-

ing as Experience Music Project (EMP), and both are housed in a multi-colored Frank Gehry building that sits at the foot of the Space Needle. Most of our visitors are tourists, and most of them do not consider themselves science fiction fans.

The majority of the artifacts on display in SFM are on loan from private collectors. Some people donate things to us, but—not surprisingly—most people who collect rare books and movie props are quite attached to their stuff and want it back after a while. We are not a collecting or research institution, and we only have about two hundred objects in our permanent collection, but we have packed the museum to the gills with artifacts and images.

Opinions vary as to the coolest thing in the museum, but some of the undisputed hits are Captain Kirk's command chair from the original *Star Trek* series, the enormous alien queen from *Aliens*, and Darth Vader's helmet from *The Empire Strikes Back*. Literary types tend to fancy Neal Stephenson's mountainous

manuscript for the entire Baroque Cycle trilogy (handwritten in fountain pen), or a checklist of 242 story ideas from Poul Anderson. Book collectors love the many first editions on display, such as *The War of the Worlds*, *The Martian Chronicles*, and *I, Robot*.

Exhibits cover the intersection between science and science fiction, as well as the history and lore of the genre. One of the most popular displays is the Armory, an exhibit packed with ray guns, blasters, knives, swords, and other weird weapons. Guests are also mesmerized by the giant Cities of Tomorrow video screen, showing detailed CGI versions of the urban environments of *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, and *The Jetsons*.

"My favorite exhibit is usually the one that I'm currently working on," says Jacob McMurray. "I get really excited about delving deep into new content with which I'm not so familiar. I also like thinking about new ways to visually tell stories and methods by which I can convey con-

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tent to multiple audiences—ranging from the casual observer to the radical nerd.”

Brooks Peck has recently curated our new exhibit on the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI). The topic lent itself more to science than fiction, so his challenge was to find a way to tie the content in with the rest of the museum. “SETI is such a complex topic, and the space for the exhibit was limited, so it was a struggle, actually, to fit in as much *science fiction* as I wanted,” says Brooks. “Most of the exhibit could live comfortably in a science museum. The break comes in the section on the Fermi Paradox, where we use a variety of SF stories, from Vernor Vinge to EC Comics, to explore the question of why we haven’t met any aliens.”

As for me, my favorite exhibit is Not So Weird Science, and my favorite artifact is an original, hand-corrected 1919 manuscript of *The Skylark of Space*, by E.E. “Doc” Smith, acknowledging Mrs. Lee Hawkins Garby as a collaborator. (Smith enlisted Mrs. Garby’s help to write more effective female characters and dialogue.) The manuscript is nondescript compared to the sleek Gundam battle suit models and bustling space dock view screen near it, but *Skylark* is quietly awesome, representing a continuum of ideas and imagination that encompasses the entire twentieth century and beyond.

SFM FAQ, Part Two:

Q: I have an amazing collection of old pulp magazines / Ace doubles / latex Vulcan ears. Would SFM like to borrow / buy it?

A: Alas, no. We are a non-profit museum, and budgetary and

space considerations prohibit us from amassing a collection. When we build exhibits, we seek out specific artifacts based on our curatorial decisions.

In putting together exhibits, the SFM curatorial team knew that representing the heart of science fiction—the books and magazines that started it all—would be a challenge. It’s easy to get people excited about movie props, because everybody loves ray guns and alien masks. But how do you build an exhibit that displays manuscripts, pulps, and books without being . . . dull?

Jacob explains, “Since I’m at heart a reader of SF, I find looking at rare first editions of cool books totally exciting, but I do recognize that we attract a wide audience at SFM, many of whom would find displays of only books quite boring.”

Purists will be relieved to see that we did not shirk our duty to reflect SF’s literary heritage. In our exhibits, so-called “flat” artifacts are juxtaposed with exciting graphics and as many similarly themed three-dimensional artifacts as we can fit, creating a dense museum that accurately reflects the depth and breadth of the genre.

“We employ several tactics to make SFM exciting for everybody,” says Jacob. “First, we try to integrate the books with movie props, original manuscripts with artwork, and so on. We also try to show the literary sources or inspirations of many SF films and television series. And finally, we make a point to show the authorial process and intent behind the influential texts of science fiction.”

For example, in the SF Community exhibit, we wanted to show the history of fandom, highlighting the fan-to-pro transition unique to sci-

ence fiction. To do this, we display a bunch of fanzines dating from the early years of science fiction flying out of a mimeograph machine. The fanzines are surrounded by an old newsstand setting, where classic pulp mags display enticing rockets and brass-bra heroines. Next, we visually connect the early efforts with the later successes of three notable fans who turned pro: Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Forrest Ackerman.

Of course, no matter how hard we work at representing every aspect of science fiction, we only have thirteen thousand square feet to work with, and a building with very, very few right angles. Our cases are small, so we have to distill each concept down to its core elements. We've got twenty-five exhibits in four galleries, and everywhere you look, there's something to look at, read, watch, listen to, or dream about.

SFM FAQ, Part Three:

Q: I'm appalled that my favorite show/author isn't represented in the museum! Do you plan to add a new exhibit featuring Stargate/Battlestar Galactica/Farscape/Author X?

A: Alas, no . . . well, maybe. The near future holds many exciting possibilities for artifact changes and new themes. Stay tuned.

Our public programs also focus on both media and books. We've presented dozens of readings, panels, conferences, and films as well as special appearances by celebrities and luminaries of the SF world, many of whom sit on our advisory board. In 2006, we will host a celebration of the fortieth anniversary of *Star Trek*, a reading series, film festival, and of course the induction of four more creators into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

Education outreach manager Leslie Howle has the enviable task of bringing in science fiction luminaries to read or speak at the museum. "Science fiction comes to us through literature and film, and I love the way we support creative material that comes from good writing in both areas. We've had some of the best science fiction and fantasy authors working today read and speak at the museum, and our online writer's workshop with James Gunn is helping to encourage new writers. . . . I find this whole process incredibly exciting and inspiring."

Leslie is also coordinating the Sci-

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ence Fiction Short Film Festival. "There are some very exciting things to look forward to at SFM in 2006, but our first annual Science Fiction Short Film Festival in partnership with the Seattle International Film Festival may top my list," she says. We're going to show the best films in February, and the winner gets to pitch an idea to the SCI FI Channel.

At www.sfhomeworld.org, you can find images and content representing the museum, from biographies of Hall of Fame members to schedules of upcoming events. Brooks Peck is the web editor, and he has big plans for the future. "I would love for us to be able to host an informal, chatty blog about the museum—a place to share the strange and fun behind-the-scenes stories about keeping this place going. The blog could give the inside info on our artifacts, such as: why is the Charlton Heston mannequin so squishy? Why does the Muffit costume smell like a chimpanzee?"

SFM FAQ, Part Four:

Q: I don't live in Seattle. Is there any way I can be involved with the museum?

A: Yes! If you join the museum, you will be supporting our educational mission and promoting science fiction as a popular art form. You will help introduce kids to all the worlds of adventure that science fiction has to offer.

Leslie Howle calls the museum "the only institution that is dedicated to chronicling and curating the books, films, and artifacts associated with the stories that help give us

perspective on ourselves as humans." She says even out-of-towners can find a reason to support the museum.

"The Hall of Fame is here to remind us of everything the great creators in the field have given us and their legacy for generations to come. If you care about science fiction, this museum benefits you."

Like all non-profits, SFM is always working toward self-sufficiency. We have very generous patrons, and that's great, but our fundraising efforts never end. And we have the same sorts of conflicts and confusions in our offices that other workplaces do.

Since getting this job, I've given a lot of thought to museums and their uses. I wonder sometimes whether putting something in a museum signals its death throes as a cultural force. Once things are behind glass, they lose some of their immediacy as objects and risk becoming relics—old and untouchable. We've tried to avoid this by including newly published books and props from recent movies in exhibits, demonstrating that science fiction is a living genre. Many of the tough themes of science fiction are still being addressed in new amazing stories eighty years after the old *Amazing Stories*.

I may be preaching to the choir, but with the twentieth century behind us, it's a great time to examine where science fiction has been and where it's going, and SFM holds some of the treasures that allow us to do that.

Says Jacob McMurray, "Whether it's cool to admit or not, science fiction is one of the major cultural forces that has molded our society and our perception of what could be. I can't think of a better topic for a museum." ○

NANO COMES TO CLIFFORD FALLS

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress is the author of twenty-three books. Her work has been translated into fourteen languages, including—to the author's bemusement—Klingon. Nancy is currently working on a medical thriller. Her last story for us, "My Mother, Dancing" (June 2004) is a current finalist for the Nebula Award.

I was weeding the garden when nanotech came to my town. The city got it a month earlier, but I haven't been to the city since last year. Some of my neighbors went—Angie Myers and Emma Karlson and that widow, Mrs. Blanston, from church. They brought back souvenirs, things made in the nanomachine, and the scarf Angie showed me was really cute. But with three little kids, I don't get out much.

That day was hot, with the July sun hanging overhead like it wasn't ever going to move. Bob McPhee from next door stuck his head over the fence. His Rottweiler snarled through the chain links. I don't like that dog, and Kimee, my middle one, is afraid of it.

"Hey, Carol, don't you know you don't have to do that no more?" Bob said. "The nanomachinery will make you all the tomatoes and peas you want."

"Hey, Bob," I said. I went on weeding, swiping at the sweat on my forehead with the back of my hand. Jackie watched me from the shade of the garage. I'd laid him on a blanket dressed in just his diaper and he was having a fine time kicking away and then stopping to eat his toes.

"They're giving Clifford Falls four of 'em," Bob said. Since he retired from the fire department, he don't have enough to do all day. "I saw it on TV. The mayor's getting 'em installed in the town hall."

"That's good," I said, to say something. I could hear Will and Kimee inside the kitchen, fighting over some toy.

"Mayor'll run the machinery. One for food, one for clothing, the other two he's taking requests. I already put in mine, for a sports car."

That got my attention. "A car? A whole car?"

"Sure, why not? Nano can make anything. The town is starting with one request from each person, first come first served. Then after that . . . I dunno. I guess Mayor Johnson'll work it out. Hey, gorgeous, stop that weeding and come have a beer with me. Pretty gal like you shouldn't be getting all hot and sweaty at *weeding*."

He leered at me, but he don't mean anything by it. At least, I don't think he does. Bob's over fifty but still looks pretty good, and he knows it, but he also knows I'm not that kind. Jack might've took off two months ago, but I don't need anyone like Bob, a married man, for temporary fun and games.

"I like the taste of home-grown tomatoes," I tell him. "Ones at the Safeway taste like wallpaper."

"But nano won't make tomatoes that taste *processed*," he says in that way that men like to correct women. "That machinery will make the best tomatoes this town ever tasted."

"Well, I hope you're right." Then Will and Kimee spilled their fight out through the screen door into the back yard, and Jackie started whimpering on his blanket, and I didn't have no time for any nanomachinery.

Still, I was curious, so in the late afternoon, when it wasn't quite so hot, I packed up the stroller and the kids and I went downtown.

Clifford Falls isn't much of a town. We're so far out on the plains that all we got is a single square ringed with dusty pick-ups and the teenagers' scooters. There's about two dozen stores, the little brick town hall with traffic court and Barry Anderson's police room and such, the elementary school, Baptist and Methodist churches, Kate's Lunchroom, and the Crow Bar. Down by the tracks is the grain elevator and warehouses. That's about it. Once a movie was filmed here because the movie people wanted some place that looked like it might be fifty or sixty years ago.

Soon as I turned the corner I could see where the nanomachinery must be. People milled around the patch of faded grass in front of the town hall, people who probably should have still been to work on a Wednesday afternoon. A big awning stretched across the front of the building with a huge metal box under it, nearly big as my bedroom. To one side the mayor, who retired two years ago from the factory in Minneonta, stood on a crate right there in the broiling sun without so much as a hat on his bald head, making a speech.

"—greatest innovation since supercheap energy to raise our way of life to—"

"What's getting made in that box?" I asked Emma Karlson. She had her twins in a fancy new stroller. Just after Jack left me, her Ted got taken on at the factory.

"A dais," she said.

"A what?"

"A thing for the mayor to stand on instead of that apple crate. It's supposed to be done in a few minutes."

What a dumb thing to make—Mr. Johnson could just as well have got-

ten a good stepladder from Bickel's Hardware. But I suppose the dais was by way of demonstration.

And I have to admit it was impressive when it came out of the box. Four men had to move it, a big fancy platform with a top like a gazebo and steps carved on their sides in fancy shapes. After the men set it down, there was this moment of electric silence, like a downed power line run through the crowd, and then everybody started shouting.

"Make me a rocking chair!"

"Tell it to grow a table!"

"I need a new rug for the dining room!"

"Make a good bottle of booze!"

Emma turned to me. Her eyes were big and shining. "Some people are so ignorant. That big nanomachine don't make anything to eat or drink—the ones inside do that. Three little ones, for food and clothes and small quick stuff. Mayor Johnson already explained all that, but some people just can't listen."

The crowd was pressing closer to the new dais, and a few men started to climb the fancy steps. Kimee was getting restless, pulling on my hand, but Will said suddenly, "Mommy, tell the machine to make me a dog!"

Emma laughed. "It can't do that, Will. Nobody but God can make a living thing."

I said, "Then how can it make a tomato? A tomato's living."

Emma said, "No, it's not. It's dead after you pick it."

"But it *was* living."

Emma got that look in her eyes that I seen there ever since the third grade: *Don't argue with me because you'll regret it*. Will jumped up and down screaming, "A dog! A dog! I want a dog!" The people around the dais were pushed back by Barry Anderson and his deputy, but they didn't stop shouting at Mayor Johnson. I grabbed Will, smiled hard at Emma, and started home.

Nanotech wasn't going to put Kimee down for a nap or breast-feed Jackie. And it sure as hell wasn't going to get my bastard husband back to help me do those things.

Not that I wanted him.

I waited for nano to make Clifford Falls look like the places in the TV shows. What surprised me was that it did.

I didn't see anything for a few weeks because both Kimee and Will came down with some sort of bug. Diarrhea and cramps. The doctor I got on the computer told me which chemicals to squirt over samples of their shit and when I told him what colors the shit turned, he said it wasn't serious but I should keep the kids in, make them drink a lot of water, and keep them away from the baby. In a two-bedroom rented house, that alone took a lot of my time. But we managed. Emma bought the medicine I needed at Merkelson's and left it on the doorstep. She left three casseroles, too, and some chocolate-chip cookies.

Ten days later, when they were better, I baked Emma a sponge cake to thank her. After the kids were dressed and the stroller packed up, we went outside and I had to blink hard.

"Wow!" Will said. "Mommy, look at that!"

Parked in Bob McPhee's driveway was the reddest car I ever seen, low and smooth and shiny. It looked *fast*. Will ran over to it and I called, "Don't touch, Will!"

"Oh, he can't hurt it," Bob said with a sort of fake casualness. He was bursting with pride. "And if he did hurt it, I'll just wait until my turn comes up on the Big Gray and order me another one."

The Big Gray—that must be what they were calling the largest nanomachine. Stupid name. It sounded like a sway-backed horse.

Bob leered at me. "Wanna go for a ride, baby?"

"Why don't you take your wife?" I said, but I smiled when I said it because I'm a wuss who likes to stay on good terms with my neighbors.

"Oh, I did," Bob said, waving his hand airily, "but there's always room for one more, if you know what I mean."

"A ride! A ride!" Will shouted.

"Not today, Will, we're gong to see Jon and Don." That distracted him; Emma's twins are his best friends.

Emma met me at the door dressed in a gorgeous yellow sundress with a low neck and full skirt. Emma was always pretty, even when we were thirteen, but I'd never seen her look like this. She'd done things to live up to the dress, fixed her hair and put on make-up and even had on rhinestone earrings.

"God, you look amazing!" I said, in my old jeans with baby puke on my T-shirt. Emma touched her earrings.

"Real diamonds, Carol! Ted used his second pick at the nanomachine to choose these!"

I gaped at her. The nanomachine could make real diamonds? Will barreled past me toward Don and Jon and I saw that all three of them jumped onto a new blue sofa covered with the nicest material I'd ever seen.

All I could think of to say was, "I brought you a sponge cake. A thank-you for all you done when the kids were sick."

"Well, aren't you the sweetest thing. Thank you. I'd offer you a piece now but, well, Kitty'll be here in a few minutes to take the twins."

Kitty Svenson was the teenager who babysat for everybody. She was saving up for secretarial school. Ted came out from the bedroom dressed in a bathrobe.

"Oh, God, Ted, have you got this diarrhea-thing, too? I'm sorry, it's a bitch. Come on, Will, let's go. Em, I can take the twins while Ted's sick."

"I'm not sick, Carol," Ted said. Emma blushed. I was really confused. This was a Tuesday morning.

"I quit the factory," Ted said. "No need to kill myself working now."

"But . . . the mortgage. . ."

"The nano's making us a house," Emma said proudly.

"A house? A whole house?"

"One part of a room at a time," Ted said. "Em and I are both using all our picks for it. We'll put it on that piece of land my daddy left me by the lake, and the whole house'll finish just before the bank forecloses on this one. I got it all figured out."

"But . . ." My brain wasn't working right. I just couldn't take it in, somehow.

"The food nano is making all our meals now," Emma said. "Just churning 'em out like sausages. Here, Carol, taste this." She darted into the kitchen, earrings swinging, and came back with a bowl of small round things like smooth nuts.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But it tastes good. The food nano can't make like, you know, real meats or anything, but it does pretty good delivering things that look and taste like fruits and veggies and bread, and this stuff is the protein."

I picked up one of the round things and nibbled. It did taste good, sort of like cold spicy chicken. But something in me recoiled anyway. Maybe it was the texture, sort of bland and mushy. I palmed the rest of the ball. "Mmmmmmmmm."

"Told you so," Emma said triumphantly, like the round balls were things she'd baked herself. "Oh, here's Kitty."

Kitty Svenson hauled herself up the steps. Fat and acne-covered and dirt poor, she was the sweetest girl in town, and every time I saw her my heart ached. She liked Tom DeCarno, who lived down the street from me and was the starting quarterback on the football team at the consolidated high school in Remington. He'd notice Kitty on the day that Hell got a hockey franchise.

It was obvious what Emma in her sexy new dress and Tom in his bathrobe were going to be doing, so I dragged the protesting Will and we went home. I saw things I hadn't noticed on the way to Em's: a new playhouse in the backyard of the big house on the corner. Fresh chain-link fence around the Alghren place. The Connors' pick-up in their driveway, which meant that Eddie hadn't gone to work at the factory, either. Across the street, a woman I thought I didn't know, dressed up like a city girl in a ruffled suit and high heels, until I realized it was Sue Merkelson, the pharmacist's wife.

At home I took the kids into the backyard and weeded the tomatoes, which were nearly strangled with ten days' worth of weeds. Jack used to do at least some of the weeding. But that was before, and this was now, and I kept at it until the job was done.

By late August the factory in Minneonta had closed. Most of the men in town who didn't farm were out of work, but nobody seemed to mind much. The Crow Bar was full all the time, groups playing cards and laughing at TV. I saw them spilling out onto the street the one time I went to the supermarket to buy Pampers and milk.

Emma told me on the phone that Mayor Johnson, Barry Anderson, and Anderson's deputy had the nanomachines on a regular schedule. Every morning people lined up to pick up whatever their food order'd been from the previous day, enough food for all that day's meals plus a little over to store. Another machine made whatever clothes you picked out of a catalogue, in whatever size matched after you gave in your measurements. It made blankets and curtains and tablecloths, too, anything out of cloth.

The last two machines, including the big one, turned out everything else, picked from a different catalogue, turn by turn.

The county's corn, ready to harvest, sat in the fields. Nobody wanted to buy it, and except for the farm owners, nobody hired on to harvest it.

Nearly every family in town drove a new car, from six different models that our nanos were programmed to make. There was a lot of red and gold vehicles in our streets.

"I want a playhouse, Mommy," Will whined. "Caddie Alghren got a new playhouse! I want one, too!"

I looked at him, standing there in his rumpled little pajamas with trains on them, looking like his best friend just died. His hair fell over his forehead just like Jack's used to do.

"How do you know Caddie's got a new playhouse?"

"I saw it! From my window!"

"You can't see into Caddie's yard from your window. Did you climb out up onto the roof again, Will?"

He hung his head and twisted the sleeves of his pajamas into crumpled balls.

"I told you that going up on that roof is dangerous! You could fall and break your neck!"

"I'm sorry," he said, raising his little face up to me, and I melted even though I knew he wasn't sorry at all and would do it again. "I'm sorry, Mommy. Can't we get a playhouse? We been inside all summer, feels like!"

He was right. I'd only taken the kids outside our yard a few times. I'd hardly been out myself. I told myself that it was because I didn't want to see everybody's pitying looks. (*"Jack run off with that sexy girl from the hardware store, Chrissie Somebody, just left Carol and those kids without so much as a backward glance."*) But it wasn't just that.

The big freezer downstairs was almost empty. I'd used up everything I could. I run out of Tide last Thursday and the laundry was piling up. Worse, the Pampers were nearly gone. I had to keep the checking account, the half of it that Jack left, to pay the rent and the phone as long as I could. After that . . . I didn't know yet. Not yet.

So I guessed it was time. I didn't understand why I didn't want to go before, didn't understand why I didn't want to go now. But it was time.

"Okay, honey, we'll get you a playhouse," I said. "Find your sneakers."

When I had Jackie changed and fed, Will and Kimee dressed, the stroller packed with diapers and water, we set off outside. Will was good, holding onto the side of the stroller and not running ahead. Kimee stood on the back bar and whimpered a little; she gets prickly heat in the summer. But when we turned the corner toward the town square, she stopped fussing and stared, just like me and Will. The whole place was full of garbage cans. Clean, blue, plastic garbage cans, hundreds of them, stacked and thrown and lying on their sides, not a single one of them holding any garbage. People milled around, talking angrily. I saw my neighbor.

"Bob, what on Earth—"

He was too angry even to leer at me. "That Beasor kid! The one that won the state technology contest a few years ago—that kid's too smart-

ass for his own good, I said so then! He hacked into the Big Gray somehow and now all it'll make is garbage cans, no matter what you tell it!"

I craned my neck to see the big metal box under its awning. Sure enough, another garbage can popped out. A bubble of something started in my belly and started to rise up in me. "Is . . . is . . ."

"The kid left town! Anderson's got an APB out on him. You haven't seen Danny Beasor, have you, Carol?"

"I haven't seen anybody," I said. The bubble rose higher and now I knew what it was: laughter. I turned my face away from Bob.

"If that kid knows what's good for him, he'll keep on running," Bob said. He was really upset. "Now the mayor's shut down the other nanomachines, except the food one, until the repair guys get out here from the city. You get your food today, Carol?"

"No, but I'll come back later," I managed to say, without laughing in Bob's face. "K-Kimee's not feeling well."

"Okay," he said, not really interested. "Hey, Earl! Wait!" He pushed through the garbage cans toward Earl Bickel across the square.

Will somehow understood that there would be no playhouse today. He screwed up his face, but before he could start to howl, I said, "Will! Look at all these great cans! We can make the best playhouse ever out of them!"

His face cleared. "Cool!"

So we nested and dragged home four garbage cans, with a little help from the teenage Parker boys, who are nice kids and who seemed glad to have something to do. They found some boards in the basement, plus a hammer and nails, and spent all afternoon making a playhouse with four garbage-can rooms. Will was in seventh heaven. I couldn't pay them, but I unfroze and toasted the last of my home-made banana bread, and they gobbled it down happily. Will and Kimee, her itching forgotten, played in the garbage cans until dark.

The next day all the nanomachines were working again, and I put in a daily food order. But I left the kids at home with Kitty Svenson when I picked up my order, and I started canning all the squash, beans, peppers, corn, and melons in the garden.

School opened. Will was in first grade. I walked him there the first day and he seemed to like his teacher.

By the third week of school, she'd quit.

By the fifth week, so had the teacher who replaced her, along with a few other faculty.

"They just don't want to work when they don't have to, and why should they?" Emma said. She sat in my kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee and wearing a strange hat that sloped down to cover half her face. I suppose she picked it out of the nano-catalogues—it must be what they were wearing in the city. The color was pretty, though, a warm peach. It was practically the first morning she'd made time for me in weeks. "With nano, nobody has to work if they don't want to."

"Did the twins' teacher quit, too?"

"No. It's old Mrs. Cameron. She's been teaching so long she probably

can't even imagine doing anything else after she gets up in the morning. Carol, look at this place. How come you let it get so shabby?"

I said mildly, "There isn't too much money since Jack left. Just enough for the rent."

"That asshole . . . but that's not what I meant and you know it. Why haven't you replaced those old curtains and sofa with nano ones? And that TV! You could get a real big one, with an unbelievable picture."

I put my elbows on the table and leaned toward her. "I'll tell you the truth, Em: I don't know. I get nano food and diapers, and I got some school clothes for Will, but anything else . . . I don't know."

"You're just being an idiot!" she said. She almost shouted it—way too angry for just my saggy sofa. I reached out and pulled off the sloping hat. Emma's eye was swollen nearly shut, and every color of squash in my garden.

All at once she started sobbing. "Ted . . . he never done anything like that before . . . it's terrible on men, being laid off! They get so bored and mad—"

"He wasn't laid off, he quit," I said, but gently.

"Same thing! He just scowls himself around the house, yells at the kids—they're glad to be back in school, let me tell you!—and criticizes everything I do, or he orders Scotch from the nano—did order it until Mayor Johnson outlawed any nano liquor and—"

"He did? The mayor did?" I said, startled.

"Yeah. And so last Thursday, Ted and I had this big fight, and . . . and . . ." Suddenly she changed tone. "You don't know anything, Carol! You sit here safe and alone, thinking you're so superior to nano, just like you always acted so superior to poor Jack—oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that!"

"Probably you did," I said evenly, "but it's all right. Really it is, Em."

All at once she got defiant. "You're thinking I'm just dumping on you because Ted hit me. Well, I'm not. It was only that once, most of the time he's a good husband. Our new house by the lake will be done in a few more weeks and then everything'll be better!"

I didn't see how, but all I said was, "I'll bet the house is pretty."

"It's gorgeous! It's got a blue-brick fireplace in the living room—*blue* bricks! And it's equipped with just everything, all those robo-appliances like you see on TV—I won't have to do hardly anything!"

"I can't wait to see it," I said.

"You'll love it," she said, put her hat back on so it covered her eye, and stared at me with triumph and fear.

I pulled Will out of school to home-school him. He didn't mind once I got the Bellingham grandkids to school at my place, and then Caddie Alghren. The Bellinghams were farmers going bust. Mr. Bellingham was still doing dairy, though, even while his crops rotted in the fields. Mrs. Bellingham's always been sickly and she never struck me as real smart. But Hal Bellingham is smart, and he looked at me real sharp when I said I would home-school his grandkids because the teachers were all quitting.

"Not all, Carol."

"No, not yet. And some won't quit. But the government's not getting much tax money because nobody's earning and the TV says that the government is taking itself apart bit by bit." I didn't understand that, but Mr. Bellingham looked like he might. "How many teachers'll stay when they can't get paid at all?"

"That time's a ways off."

"Maybe."

"What makes you think you can teach my grandkids? Begging your pardon, but you don't look or sound like a college graduate."

"I'm not. But I did good in high school, and I guess I can teach first- and second-graders. At any rate, in my living room they'll be safe from the kinds of vandalism you see all around town now."

"What'll you use for books?"

"We have some kids' books, I'll get more out of the library as long as it lasts, and we'll make books, the kids and me. It's fun to write your own stories, and they can read each other's."

"You aren't going to get books from the nanomachinery?"

"No." I said it flat out, and we looked at each other, sitting there in the Bellinghams' big farm kitchen with its old-fashioned microwave.

He said, "Who's going to watch your two little ones while you teach?"

"Kitty Svenson."

"What's she get out of it?"

"That's between me and her."

"And what do you want in return?"

"Milk, and a share of the spring calves you might have sent to market, slaughtered and with the meat dressed. You aren't going to be able to get in enough hay to feed them anyway."

He got up, walked in his farm boots around his kitchen, and looked at me again. "Do you watch the news, Carol?"

"Not much. Little kids take a lot out of you."

"You should watch. Vandalism isn't limited to what we got in Clifford Falls."

I didn't say anything.

"All right, the kids will be home-schooled by you. But here, not at your place. I'll clear out the big back bedroom for you, and Kitty can use the kitchen. Mattie'll like the company. But before you agree, there's somebody I want you to meet."

"Who?"

"Suspicious little thing, aren't you? Come with me."

We went out to the barn. The cows were in the pasture, and the hayloft half empty. In an old tack room that the Bellinghams had turned into an apartment for a long-ago cattle manager, a pretty young woman sat in front of a metal table. I blinked.

The whole room was full of strange equipment, along with freezers and other stuff I recognized. The woman wore a white lab coat, like doctors on TV. She stood and smiled at us.

"This is Amelia Parsons," Bellingham said. "She used to work for Camry Biotech, which just went out of business. She's a crop geneticist."

"Hello," she said, holding out her hand. Women like her make me ner-

vous. Too polished, too educated. They all had it too easy. But I shook her hand; I'm not rude.

"Amelia's working on creating an apomictic corn plant. That's corn that doesn't need pollination, that can produce its own seeds asexually, like non-hybrid varieties once did, and like blackberries and mangos and some roses do now. Apomictic corn would keep all the good traits of hybrid corn, maybe even with added benefits, but farmers wouldn't have to buy seed every year."

"I couldn't work on this very much at Camry," Amelia said to me. Her pretty face glowed. Her red hair was cut in one of those complicated city cuts. "Even though apomixis was my doctoral thesis. The biotech company wanted us to work on things that were more immediately profitable. But now that I don't need to earn a salary, that oversight agencies are pretty much dismantling, and that I can get the equipment I need from nano . . . well, nano makes it possible for me to do some real work!"

I smiled at her again, because I didn't have anything to say. There was a baby-food stain on my jeans and I moved my hand to cover it.

"Thanks, Amelia," Hal Bellingham said. "See you later."

On the way back to the house, he said quietly, "I just wanted you to see the other side, Carol."

I didn't answer.

My little school started on Monday. Caddie Alghren, whose mother had been killed by a drunk driver last spring, clung to me at first, but Will and she were friends and as long as she could sit next to him, she was all right. The three Bellingham kids were well-behaved and smart. Kitty watched Kimee and Jackie in the kitchen and helped Mattie Bellingham. At night Kitty went home with me, because her stepfather had started to come into her room at night. Nothing real bad had happened yet, but she hated him and was glad to babysit for her keep.

After the kids finally got to sleep each night, Kitty and I watched the TV, like Hal said, and saw what was happening in the cities. A lot of people won't work if they don't have to. But a lot of people not working means a lot of broken things don't get fixed. Nano can make water pipes and schoolbooks and buses and toilets. It can't install them or tech them or drive them. The cities were getting to be pretty scary places.

Clifford Falls wasn't that bad. But it wasn't all that far out from the city, either. Kitty and I were watching TV one night, the kids in bed, when the door burst open and two men rushed in.

"Look at this—not just the one, *two* of them," one man said, while I was already reaching for the phone. He got there first and knocked it out of my hand. "Not that it would help you, lady. Not a lot of police left. Kenny, I'll take this one and you take the fat girl."

Kitty had shrunk back against the sofa. I tried to think fast. The kids—if I could just keep any noise from waking the kids, the men might not even know they were there. Then no matter what happened to us, the kids would be safe. But if Will saw either of their faces, if he could identify them . . . and Kitty, Kitty was only fifteen. . . .

I said quickly, "Leave her alone. She doesn't know how to do anything,

she won't be any fun for you. If you leave her alone, I'll let you both do me. I won't even fight. I'd be a lot more fun for you." My gorge rose and I tasted vomit.

The two men looked at each other. Finally "Kenny" shrugged and said, "The fat one's ugly, anyway."

The other one nodded and his piggy eyes gleamed. Noise—the important thing was no noise. I got down on the floor and unzipped my jeans. Oh, God—but no noise, no noise to wake the kids, and I had to protect Kitty, God, *fifteen*. . . .

My head exploded.

No, not my head, the head leering above me. Blood and brains splattered over me. Then there was a second shot and the other man went down. I staggered up, puked, and heard Will and Kimee screaming. When I could see again, the kids stood in the doorway, clinging together, and Kitty still sat on the sofa, the gun in her hand.

She was the calmest one there, at least on the outside. "I stole it to use on my stepfather if I had to, just before you said I could live here. Carol—" Then she started shaking.

"It's okay," I said stupidly and, my own hand trembling, picked up the phone to call the cops.

I got a *recording* at 911. "I'm sorry, but due to reduced manpower, your call may have to wait. Please stay on the line until—" I hung up and called Barry Anderson's cell.

It was turned off. When he finally got there, three hours later, he said it was the only sleep he'd had in two days. His deputy quit last week and left for Florida. By that time I'd gotten the kids back to sleep, the room and myself cleaned up, and Kitty to stop shaking.

The next day, Hal Bellingham moved us all out to the farm.

By spring, there were fifty-four of us on the farm, plus ten kids. And in the spring, Jack came back.

I was coming out of the lamb barn with Will, who saw Jack first. He cried, "Daddy!" and my heart froze. Then Will was running across the muddy yard and throwing himself into Jack's arms. I trailed slowly behind.

"How'd you get past the guards?" I said.

"Bellingham let me in. What kind of set-up you got going here, anyway?"

I didn't answer, just stared at him. He looked good. Well-fed, well-dressed, maybe a little heavier but still the handsomest man ever to come out of Clifford Falls. This was how Will, beaming in his daddy's arms, would look in twenty years.

Jack reddened slightly. "Why are you living here, Carol? Don't tell me you and old Bellingham . . ."

"That *would* be what you'd think. The answer is no."

Did he look relieved? "Then why—"

"Mommy's my teacher!" Will shouted. "And I can write whole sentences!"

"Good for you," Jack said. To me he suddenly blurted, "Carol, I don't know how to say this, but I'm so sorry, I—"

"Where's Chrissie? You get tired of her the way you did of me?"

"No, she . . . who the hell is *that*?"

His eyes almost bugged out of his head, and well they might. Denny Bonohan strolled out of the house, dressed in one of his costumes. Denny's gay, which was hard enough for me to take, but he's also an actor, which is even worse because he strolls out to do his share of guard duty dressed in outlandish things he and the other two actors brought with them. Now he wore tights with a bright tunic almost as long as a dress, all in shades of gold. Hal is amused by him but I think Denny's loony and I won't let the kids be alone with him. My right, Hal says in his quiet way, and what Hal says goes.

I said, "That's my new boyfriend." I said it to make Jack mad but instead he threw back his head and laughed, his white teeth gleaming in the sunshine.

"Not you, Carol. Never. I know you that much, anyways."

"What are you doing here, Jack?"

"I want to see my kids. And I want . . . I want you, Carol. I miss you. I was wrong, as wrong as a man can be. Please take me back."

Jack apologizing was always hard to resist, although it's not like he ever did all that much of it. Will clung hard to his father's neck. Also, an old sweet feeling was slipping into me, along with the anger. I wanted to hit him, I wanted to hug him. I wanted to curl up inside him again.

"It's up to the Council if you can stay here."

"Here?"

"We aren't leaving, the kids and me."

He took a deep breath. "What's the Council? What do I have to do?"

"You have to start by talking to Hal. If Denny's on guard duty, Hal's probably coming off."

"Guard duty?" Jack said, bewildered.

"Yeah, Jack. You're back in the army now. Only this time, we all enlisted."

"I don't . . ."

"Come on," I said roughly. "It's up to a vote of the Council. For my part, I don't give a damn what you do."

"You're lying," he said softly, in that special voice we used between us, and I damned him all over again because it was true.

July again, and we are eighty-seven people now. Word spreads. About half are people who fled nano, like me. The other half embraced it because it lets them do whatever they'd wanted to do before. Some of those ones have their own nanomachines, little ones, made of course by other nanomachines. Hal allows them to use nano to produce things for their jobs, but not to make food or clothing or shelter or anything else we all need to survive, except for some medicines, and we're working on that.

The two kinds of people here don't always get along very well. We have five actors, Amelia the geneticist, and two other scientists, one of them studying something about the stars. We have a man writing fiction, an inventor, and, finally, a real teacher. Also two organic farmers, a sculptor, a man who carves and puts together furniture all without nails, and, of all

things, the United States chess champion, who can't find anyone good enough to play with and so plays against our old computer.

He also farms and does guard duty and lays pipe and cleans and cans and cooks, of course. Like all the rest of us. The things that the chess player didn't know how to do, which was everything, we taught him. Just like Hal, who was a Marine once, taught us all to shoot.

It's pretty bad out there now, although the TV says it's getting better as "society adjusts to this most cataclysmic of social changes." I don't know if that's true or not. I guess it varies. There was a lot of rioting and disease and fires. Some places have some government left, some places don't, some are like us now, mostly our own government, although Hal and two educated women keep our taxes filed and all that. One of the women told me that we don't have to actually pay taxes because the farm shows a consistent loss. She was a lawyer, but a religious lawyer. She says nano is Satan's work.

Amelia Parsons says nano is a gift from God.

Me, I think something different. I think nano is a sorter. The old sorting used to put the people with money and education and nice things in one pile and the rest of us in another. But nano sorts out two different piles: the ones who like to work because work is what you do, and the ones who don't.

It was kind of like everybody won the lottery all at once. I saw a TV show about lottery winners once, a show that followed them around for a year or two after they won real big money. By that time, most of them were worse off than before they won that money: miserable and broke again and with all their relatives mad at them. But some used the money to make nicer lives. And some just gave nearly all of it away to charity and went back to taking care of themselves.

Jack lasted two months on the farm. Then he was gone again.

I get email from him every once in a while. Mostly he asks after the kids. He never says where he is or what he's doing instead of working. He never says who he's with, or if he's happy. I guess he is, or he'd come back here. People usually end up doing what makes them happiest, if they can.

A month ago I went with Hal and some others down to the lake to catch fish. A house stood there, burned to the ground, weeds already growing over the blue brick fireplace. In the ashes I found one diamond earring. Which I left there.

Now Kimee is in the garden, waiting for me to pick peas. I'm going to show her how to shell them, too, and how to separate the good pods from the bad ones. She's only five, but it's never too early to learn. O

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William Preston teaches English at a small independent school and lives with his wife and daughters in Central New York. His poetry and non-fiction have appeared in various literary journals. In his first published fiction, he quietly explores what it may be like when . . .

YOU WILL GO TO THE MOON

William Preston

I had a hard enough time after my parents moved to Arizona. To picture where they lived, I imagined a map of the country, the states in various colors, the mountain ranges indicated by shadows. This helped me conceive the distance from rural New Jersey to Tucson. Once I'd visited them, I could call to mind the landscape: their isolated house, the red earth, mountains taking in too-vivid sunsets that seemed like the planet's first or last days.

I missed having my parents nearby, of course, but, more, I now lacked an excuse to see my old hometown. With no friends there, I had no reason to drive the two hours to southeastern Pennsylvania, that territory of rolling, innocuous hills, packed with development houses among a few remaining farmers' fields. My little town, more heavily trafficked than in my childhood, held my whole past, my life before life became settled and responsible. My folks moved, and it cut off my access to that. My town surfaced in dreams, though always with me in towering buildings that hadn't existed, trying to work my way downstairs to the main street and its tidy brick buildings and Colonial-era stone houses so close to the sidewalk. I was forty, married, with two girls.

The year I turned forty-three, my parents announced in a curt electronic note that they were moving again, this time to a retirement community on the moon. I sat on the back deck that night and looked in the direction of my hometown and then, for a longer time, at the moon's thin, suspended crescent. Any thinner and it would have vanished; the moon that night seemed barely able to support itself, much less life. I saw my parents seated in its sickle like figures from a child's book of poems, their legs dangling in the hazy air.

My wife joined me on the deck steps. When I noticed the sweater draped over her shoulders, I fully realized what I'd half-thought, that the evening had grown cold.

"They won't do it," Cyndi said.

I shut my eyes. "It's my father's idea. It'll happen. It's like with Arizona. My mother didn't want that, either."

"Do you think he has friends up there?"

"You know, it's not really *up*," I said, giving her the brunt of feelings I hadn't yet formed. "There's no up; it's all relative. Over. It's over. It's next to us. It's not like heaven."

"Heaven's 'up' now?"

"Yeah. Heaven's up." I faced her and her crooked smile successfully cut into my mood. "But hell's only about ten miles down the road. That development with the streets named for dogs."

"Down?" she rhetorically pushed, and her shoulder touched mine.

"Ooh, God," I sighed, letting the words pour out. "I don't know why he's doing it. I'm sure we'll find out."

When we stopped talking, I listened to the crickets, forgetting again that I was cold.

My parents visited us on their way to France. A private French firm would send up the next load of retirees and temporary workers. My mother touched her frosted perm uncertainly; behind her right ear, the hair lay flat from how she'd slept in the airplane. Her hand knew something was wrong but couldn't settle on the exact problem. This compounded her obvious anxiety. While my father was in the bathroom, I talked to her in the kitchen, standing beside her at the sink.

"I can tell you don't want to do this."

"Do what," she said flatly, watching her hand tug on the tab to raise and lower the teabag in her mug. Typical, this. My mother always feigned, well, everything. Ignorant, she made out like she knew what was what; if she knew full well the state of affairs, she forced you to do all the work, and even then you might just make her lie to your face. I never understood what this was a defense against—unless it was against a son who always questioned her.

"Come on. The moon? Just the trip to Europe is huge for you. What's it really like up there? Have you talked to anyone?"

"A woman spoke to my book club last month."

"A woman," I said.

"A woman who'd visited recently. I wish you'd heard her."

"It's not the same as living there."

She carried her mug to the counter beside the trash and went through her ritual of winding the thread around the teabag, pressing it between her thumb and the tab and, when the last drops were squeezed into the mug, letting the bag plummet into the receptacle. She'd already placed on the counter two packs of artificial sweetener. These she tore open and emptied into the mug. There lay the spoon as well; my mother always knew—or controlled—the sequence of events.

"This is a huge risk," I said.

"It's very safe." She stirred, the spoon ringing inside the mug.

"I should explain," said my father from behind me, and I turned to see him looking thoughtful and sheepish, his eyes reluctantly meeting mine. "Let's sit and talk." Then he left the room to lead me out, as if it were his own house and he knew where best to discuss such things.

He'd only gone into the next room to sit at the broad dining table, his back to one window. He spread his pale arms out and swept the dark surface as I took the chair opposite him. Facing downward, he said, "When I was little, I had a book called *You Will Go to the Moon*."

Knowing I was interrupting—he'd not paused—I asked, "So that's why you're going?"

He didn't lift his head but looked at me over his eyeglasses. It was nearly a glare. "Just let me talk. The book came out before *Apollo*'d even reached the moon, but it had these drawings of this boy taking a rocket to the space station, going up to the moon base. Everything was happening so fast in America it seemed like pretty soon the moon would be like another vacation spot.

"I never got over the disappointment that we couldn't just pop up to the moon. I had this book when I was five or six, you know, so it really made an impression on me. It's certainly part of why I studied math. I loved the picture on the cover. The moon looked so close, almost pasted on top of the sky, and you could sort of feel the ridges on the craters." Now he did pause.

"Okay," I said, to say something. I heard Cyndi come in from the garden with the girls and start talking with my mother. My father's arms swept toward his chest and away. "You can't just *pop* up, though. And you can't just pop back down. And . . . you're not young."

"You have this habit," said my father, "of telling people things they already know."

I'd heard the criticism before, so I kept my momentum. "I know those new rockets don't hit you with the same G-force, but, still, it's not like you're ready to set off on some interstellar excursion. Dad, you and Mom never even traveled much."

"And we should have. That's both our faults."

"I don't think she wants to go," I said with my mouth half shut.

A shrug seemed his only available reply, but then he thought again. "Like you said, we're old. There's nothing after this. We'd have to live a lot longer to have time for regret."

"You can regret something before you've even done it."

He sat up and looked at me like I wasn't his son, like I was a man who might, amazingly, tell him something he hadn't heard before—though that wasn't what I'd done. He'd already thought of all this.

"The house is too much for us," he said, his palms an inch above the table, settling the matter. "A retirement village on the moon. It's a little different."

"What kind of people would do this?"

He laughed. "You're looking at one." He slapped down his hands and was finished.

It would be six months before I could arrange my own journey, taking time off from the accounting firm, scheduling myself on a flight. I had no childhood desire to leave Earth, nor to explore much of anything—I had not climbed mountains, taken a pilgrimage to one of humanity's ancient places, nor swum above the vanishing coral reefs. Still, I had to see my parents.

Some nights, I sat on the living room floor, my back against the leather chair where Cyndi sat, and flipped through various brochures. So many firms headed up there—*over* there. I read their literature, studied the photos they chose. Always they showed Earthrise, the photo that troubled me most, though back then I couldn't separate my discomfort with that photo from my unease about the whole affair.

Serious research about their living conditions I avoided. I read the headlines of articles that flashed on my console or appeared in the newspaper. To our friends, to my colleagues, I didn't mention my parents' present situation, as if I were expecting something about it to change, or as if it had not actually happened.

I noticed the moon more, its phases, how high it rode, how often it hovered in the daylight—this last unsettling because I felt the moon moving not through space but through sunlight, all its surface delineation lost, smothered in the brightness. When the moon rose red, did my parents see their own landscape transformed? No, that was a trick of the atmosphere. And what of Earth? Did it ever rise with a hue that startled you? Did it sometimes appear surprisingly large? But again, no: the airless moon would always grant observers the same sky, though the Earth would, of course, pass through its own phases of light and dark, be more or less clouded, become black against the sun.

Weightlessness disagreed with me, as evidently it does with many people. My bones ached, I vomited, my brain felt lopsided in my skull. I couldn't imagine my parents enduring this. Two days out from Earth, when purportedly your system begins to make accommodations, I had trouble keeping down the food—something in the air deprived it of flavor—and even the protein bars and drinks wouldn't settle properly. I slept a lot, which is recommended; in fact, the well-stocked drug dispensary tacitly encouraged it. My dreams were . . . not exactly weightless, but somehow unlike even the usual disjointed narrative of dreams, so I imagined, lifting fuzzily from a nap, that I'd swapped dreams with another passenger. Pretty much everyone appeared addled; no one talked much.

One older couple slept an entire day. When an attendant went to wake them, the woman came around, but the man, who looked like someone acting out sleep—head tilted back, lips parted, the glint of moisture in the corner of his mouth—had died. The wife lapsed again into dreams; she dozed unaware as the staff removed his body rearward.

I felt the black spaces surrounding us become more empty, more silent. The moon was not another place like another town. You had to cross too much emptiness to get there, so it was, itself, a part of the emptiness. I felt that then and feel it now, even in daytime, when the moon seems to lie embedded in brightness. When that old man died out there, I felt more

sure than ever that my parents had . . . transgressed. That was the word that came to me. Not just a bad mistake, but a crossing over to a place where your merely being there was a violation.

I gave in to the drug-induced sleep that met me, vaguely dreading its dark gulf, yet welcoming relief from my thoughts.

After the arrival, I couldn't get my footing. In the corridor of the reception bay, with its mellow, shifting lights that formed moving patterns on the wall, my legs swam and wouldn't walk. The colors on the walls—and the very shape of the walls, curving widely outward—were meant to relax you. The brochures explained this. Psychologists and behavioral specialists had learned how to ease you into life on the moon. From the occasional windows, you saw gray below and black sky above. That stark view altered the optic nerve, over time, but also made you anxious. Something to do with our evolution. I don't remember what the wall shape was about.

My father had sent a radio message back an hour after they'd landed: "Amazing! I've gone to the moon! Another man on the flight read the same book as a kid! Lots of nice people greeted us. Don't worry." Both their names were affixed, but I heard my father's hearty hello. After my own landing, I didn't feel like speaking to anyone, not even two hours later. I asked an attendant to send a message to my family—on the moon and on Earth—just to let them know I'd arrived intact. Maybe my father had felt equally awful but managed to fake it. Perhaps he'd known I needed to be reassured; or he'd been reassuring himself; or rubbing it in my face. My parents never acted with single motives.

The attendants gave most of us boots and thin jackets fitted with weights. That helped. Some people waved them off. They'd come before and were accustomed, or they wanted the full experience. I wanted to go home.

I looked for her, but missed seeing the woman whose husband had died. What would she do now?

A series of walkways and slow-moving trams took me past housing "villages," vast enclosed farms, office complexes and scientific labs until I reached Serenity Sea, my parents' new home. A lot of work was in progress, with suites being constructed and, I saw through the windows, new units being added on. The crews laboring outdoors wore trimmer versions of what the old *Apollo* astronauts had worn. I wondered if my father's book's vision of the future had included these images, the people of Earth building without pause for a life far from home.

Their rooms were nice. I stood in the corridor, its walls running with watery colors, and looked past my mother rather than into her face; I saw furniture like we had on Earth, furniture like any furniture, not moon furniture, whatever I'd imagined that to be.

"It's like a regular apartment," I said.

My mother was looking up at me, and when I finally looked down, she said, "It was okay that we didn't meet you, wasn't it?"

"I told you not to. I needed time to get my moon legs, anyway."

"Okay."

I bent to embrace her. She felt fragile, but heavier than I expected. When she shuffled into the room, I realized why: she still wore the weighted materials they gave newcomers. "Your father's at the gym. Let me buzz him."

While she did that I wandered the rooms. I didn't wake up to the suitcase in my hand until I realized what was missing from the place: everything familiar. I let the bag settle gradually beside an overstuffed chair. Deciding where to sit froze me.

"What do you think?" asked my mother, her hands pressed together.

"It seems pleasant. No view?"

"Not from the rooms, no."

"Why is that?"

"Something about radiation," she said, and a line of sickness formed through the middle of my body, running from my throat to my crotch. I forced myself to continue pleasantly.

"Looks like you have everything in place. Comfortable."

"I can't get used to the gravity."

"Oh."

"Pretty much everything you see was made here. It's amazing what they're producing. These new plastics. It's really something."

I intended to mention the absence of familiar objects, then found something. A framed photo of my father and me leaned slightly backward on a set of shelves largely empty of books, the few books there—six?—making the point of the others' absence.

"That old picture," I said, and went to pick it up, bobbling it some as I did so. *Old* wasn't the right word, my mother had taken the shot outside our Pennsylvania house a few months before they'd moved to Arizona, but the picture did seem old somehow. The frame, at least, was the former frame. Wood, even.

"We couldn't bring much." Her voice collapsed on the final word, and she started crying.

"Hey," I said.

We sat together on the sofa. Having never comforted my mother before, I drew on the repertoire of gestures I used with Cyndi and the girls. I kept saying "Hey," alternately rubbing and gripping her far shoulder with my enveloping arm. So acutely did I feel my father's absence from the scene, I imagined briefly that he was dead.

He called my name excitedly as soon as he came in, before he even saw me.

"In here," I said. Soft words seemed loud, as if gravity's weakness left them too powerful.

My mother patted my leg and extricated herself from my grip. I understood that we weren't letting him in on her sorrow.

He gave me a tour of the facilities, ending back at the gym. The walls there were like the walls of other gyms, blue pads up to a certain height—higher than on Earth—and white walls above that. Metal beams, or perhaps a shaped plastic, crossed the high ceiling.

"Give this a look," said my father. He still wore his workout suit. After a

few preparatory breaths, he loped in slow motion across the spongy red floor, then performed an awkward Fosbury flop over an absurdly elevated rubber high-jump bar. He tumbled into a stack of pads, rolling about for some seconds before settling. His head came up, flushed and smiling. "Great, huh?"

"I imagine everybody can do that."

He clambered from the pads. "No. No. That's not true. People get lazy. You've got to work out to keep your muscles fit up here. I mean, look around." We were the only ones there. He tapped two fingers to his head, distressingly hard. "I've got the right attitude. Not everyone's got it. This is a new thing. You can't let retirement be about waiting for death. There are new opportunities."

I nearly said, *The high jump?* But I couldn't have a real conversation with him. Something wasn't right.

"Do you get . . . out much?" I asked.

"Outside? No. You can, there are excursions, but it's not a great idea every day. The radiation." Again.

"I don't follow."

"Well, no one said this was totally safe. You want to limit your exposure to solar radiation." His hands went to his hips. "Maybe if they built another facility on the Dark Side. I'd go there. Then you could get out."

"Dad. The Dark Side isn't dark. You just can't see it from Earth. It gets the same solar exposure."

I thought he was going to say it: "Why do you tell people things they already know?" but he just sucked in his cheeks and blinked.

"Huh," he said, and began bouncing on the balls of his feet, lifting off the ground and settling, like someone practicing for flight.

While my father took a nap, my mother explained. He'd blacked out on the rocket, and there'd been some struggle to revive him, a period when he lacked oxygen. After they brought him around, he was euphoric, and the feeling had stuck. The doctor had a term for it, but my mother hadn't cared enough about labeling the problem to hang on to the tag. Test pilots used to experience the same thing. For a decent percentage of those who went deeply black, they emerged altered, unafraid of death, seeing a universe suffused with joy. I could see how that unintended consequence might be useful for a test pilot. For a retiree. . . .

"Maybe you could both come home," I said.

"Is that why you came here?" She'd been chopping carrots with undue care, and now she stopped.

"Probably," I said. I breathed a few times; no words came into my head. "I suppose so. I think I thought I was just coming to see you."

"It's all right. But we can't leave."

She resumed chopping, and I let it drop. Despite what she'd said, their leaving now seemed possible. I was mistaken, not knowing then what she'd meant.

I hadn't done my research.

I slept much of one day and was sick for a good part of another. My

mother touched my forehead in search of my true temperature, recalling, for me, days I'd spent home with an ear infection in elementary school. She'd sat on my bed, her added weight on the cushion somehow a further comfort. The mattresses on the moon were too soft; she sank right in. It didn't have the same effect. I just wanted more than ever to return home.

I recovered enough by the fourth day, the day before my flight back, to join my father for a trip outside—outside, not “outdoors.” Outdoors was for Earth. Three others, all elderly, went with us. A team of four attendants swarmed each person in turn. I watched them lock the seals on my boots and gloves; my breathing quickened as four hands lowered the helmet. Sliding noises, sharp snaps, a sour taste in my mouth, and a thumbs-up from outside. I returned the gesture, but didn't believe I was safe.

You didn't simply walk from the complex. We climbed aboard two fat-wheeled rovers, a series of wide doors lifted into the ceiling, and we rolled out. Immediately around the facility, the landscape had been scoured flat, but a hundred yards farther on, you hit the real thing, and the vehicles bounced in overreaction at each irregularity.

“Just stay strapped in and enjoy!” shouted a voice in both my ears, one of the two drivers. Like any nervous passenger, I watched the path ahead. My father had to remind me what I'd come out here to see, hitting my arm with the back of his hand, pointing skyward, then flipping back my sun visor. I looked up, but gripped the seat as if nothing, really, could have held me. The unorganized and unfamiliar sprawl of stars, the denser band of the galaxy's horizon, pressed down and drew me in. I stared until we stopped moving.

I staggered from my seat, now looking too little at the ground.

“Watch your step,” said a voice, though I figured it was directed at everyone. Then my father was talking directly to me.

“Can you believe it?”

I touched the switch on my arm that let me speak directly back, and touched another that cut me off from everyone else. “Too many stars,” I said.

He laughed, a huge bark. He moved like an inflated penguin, bouncing side to side from one stiff leg to the other. I heard him breathing and humming; thinking of what my mother had told me, I tried to share his openness, his joy.

“Where's Earth?” I asked. I put down my visor when I faced toward the sun, back in the direction of the buildings and launch pads.

“Not up yet.”

“Soon?”

“I dunno.” He touched switches on his arm, evidently to talk to a guide, then turned back to me, fiddling again. “A few minutes.”

So I settled down into staring out at a sky without an Earth, uncertain how I felt about that. After a bit, my father called me, and I looked with everyone else as Earth came up over a far crater's rim, three-quarters lit by the sun. Momentarily, I panicked, thinking that I'd stopped breathing, but I found my breath had just become terribly shallow. My father must have turned off his link to me, because I did not hear him breathe at all.

Through whorls of cloud, I saw North America. I saw where I'd grown up and where I lived now. It all felt deeply wrong; I headed immediately for my seat when a guide announced it was time to turn back.

"Let me ask you about the radiation," I said to my father on the rough return ride. I kept looking between my boots at the white floor of the rover.

"Are you going to ask me something or tell me something?" I turned to find him smiling impishly.

"Ask," I said.

He leaned closer. "Am I going to tell you something you don't know or something you do know?"

I lost the energy to say more.

They did see me off for the trip home, my mother's show of happiness so false I couldn't believe my father, even in his ecstatic state, didn't see it. But their relationship was their own, and it wasn't about what I perceived or even what I knew. They stood by the moving walkway, waving and waving, strings of green and blue light rolling on the walls behind them, while I slid backwards away. They stopped waving before I did, and then I watched them go.

I ended up with an empty seat beside me and two men, both ten years younger than I, across the aisle. One day out, when the one nearest woke briefly, I tried talking with him. He had several days' worth of beard, a wide, fleshy face, and looked open to conversation. I explained the purpose of my trip. He turned out to be a construction worker; this was his second moon jaunt. It paid well.

"They recommend only a month at a time," he said. "Any more, and you can't get insured, due to the radiation. Plus, you'd be stupid. I mean, you won't *turn* stupid, which is what one guy I know thinks, he won't come up here for anything, but you'd be stupid to do that to your genes."

"Too much damage."

"Yeah." He faced forward as he talked, letting his head roll my way every sentence or so to catch my eyes, then rolling back. He didn't talk loudly, probably out of deference to his sleeping companion. "Now, I've had my kids, have three kids, so it's not like I'm damaging my genetic inheritance. But cancer's a risk. That'd take a longer exposure, and the safety regs are pretty conservative."

"But what about the people living there?"

"The shielding's not *useless*. But it's not like it really blocks much. Some rays pour right on through. Human exposure's never been tested, and

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now that you can't test animals, it's a bit of a crap shoot. That's why people don't spend more than a few months up there. It's a stepping-stone to better work back on the big blue marble. Even for the administrators. Though I'll tell you, they've got experimental shielding on the quarters of some bigwigs. The government people especially. I helped install some last year."

"My parents . . ." I said, but didn't know how to finish the thought. They'd been there half a year already.

"How old are they?"

I told him.

"See, again, it's not like they're going to have more kids. Nobody in the retirement facilities is. I mean, I suppose something bizarre could happen, but nobody's *planning* for kids. And people are pretty old, most of them older than your parents. The low grav feels good. The radiation . . . again, I'm repeating myself, but it's a crap shoot.

"In any case," he said, "they can't leave now."

I waited for him to turn my way again. When he did, he saw that I didn't follow his thinking.

"You know. . ."

"Maybe I don't," I said.

"Their muscles. They couldn't handle Earth gravity now. It's been too long, or it's pretty near to too long. You lose muscle mass, I don't care how much you work out. And your bones get fragile, like bird bones. Your heart, that's the big one. It gets accustomed to pumping on the moon. You take it back to Earth . . ." He saw I hadn't thought about any of this; his eyes had trouble rising to mine. "Well, they'd probably not survive the trip anyway."

After that, I couldn't talk. I requested more "passage medication" to put me out. When I woke many hours later, terribly hungry, I remembered a dream of the moon's surface: people without spacesuits shoveled at the gray dust, hurling it skyward.

Were they burying people up there? With nothing organic to devour them, nothing to grow from their decay, the bodies would remain unchanged under the dust. Or perhaps they folded the bodies into the soil of the farms. When the time came, regardless of the cost, I'd have to see about bringing them home.

My old hometown lay only two hours away by car, but I'd not visited since my parents' departure for Arizona. One day, mid-February, I called my wife's office from work, told her where I was going, not to wait on me for dinner, and left calmly and urgently.

The landscape grew hillier as I traveled south; the hills rolled, never loomed. They lay under snow, a thin snow that let yellow grasses poke through in the rare fields that abutted the narrow road. Once, long ago now, there'd been farms here, but now the whole region was overrun with identical houses that obscured the landscape and threatened to cover the hilltops. For all the changes, the roads were still two-lanes with no shoulders. Every old stone house belonged to a law firm. Leaving on the heat, I wastefully cracked open the windows as well, letting in the smell of the

cold, which did something at least to make me feel like I was in the country.

I wore boots. I planned to walk along my old town's main street, where the houses lay close to the sidewalk. I'd cut up through the blacktop lot of my old elementary school. From there I'd continue uphill, under tall trees, to the baseball lot, where my parents had watched me play Little League games, even then a nostalgic activity. I'd walk the bases. Above the baseball field stood Whitting Manor, a nursing home. Summer days, you could see through the wide bedroom windows old people propped up in their beds. Those who could venture outside were wheeled out to the porch that ran the length of the old main house. In winter, kids sledded from the main building down the sharp hill toward the ball field, bordered by a cedar hedgerow. I couldn't bring back the exact feeling of being on a sled, but I could see the other kids heading down the same hill or trudging back up, I could hear the screams of delight. The frigid air coming in the windows helped me remember.

Two deer leapt from behind a bush directly onto the road, not fifty feet away. Large and oblivious, they hesitated even as they landed. I jammed on the brakes. The car's computer made decisions about how to stop; sensing no other cars around, it cut briskly back and forth before leaving me to rest sideways. The deer stood just to my left, looking askance at me. The closer one flicked its ears, and I heard the flutter through the half-open window. I studied the fur where I would have struck the animal, the brown laced with black and white.

I backed up the car to straighten out, and the animals continued, unhurried, across the street, their enormous black eyes watching but unafraid. They hopped a bank and headed toward another housing development. I heard their hooves breaking the snow's icy crust.

My arms, locked in place on the steering wheel, shook. Unsteady, I left the car and took in air. The deer were gone.

Where could deer live now? Their woods were vanishing, what little bits of forest remained cut off by encroaching developments. And in winter, the landscape buried and frozen, they came out of their private places in search of food. But there were fewer fields, more cars to encounter, and their time was running out.

I remembered then that Whitting Manor had expanded when I was a kid, adding a retirement center that ate up most of the sledding hill. My elementary school had been shut down; condemned, though still beautiful on the outside, the school district couldn't even use it for offices. The traffic would be horrible in downtown. Were there even places to park?

I watched my hands shake and filled myself with a cold breath. I saw a car coming from a long way off under the bright winter sky. I thought to look: no moon.

Suddenly I didn't want to make the long trip to a place that no longer existed, or that existed perfectly only in my memory. I wanted to sit at home on my floor, playing a board game with the girls. I wanted to sit in that close living room with my wife warm nearby, her legs under a quilt. In the middle of all this cold emptiness, I felt my parents, weightless as moonlight, embrace me and let me go. ○

L. Timmel Duchamp is the author of a collection of short fiction—*Love's Body, Dancing in Time*—a collection of essays—*The Grand Conversation*—and three novels—*Alanya to Alanya, Renegade*, and *The Red Rose Rages (Bleeding)*. She has been a finalist for the Nebula and Sturgeon awards and been shortlisted for the Tiptree Award several times. A selection of her essays and fiction can be found at ltimmel.home.mindspring.com. Her latest tale for *Asimov's* tells the extraordinarily sad story of . . .

THE WORLD AND ALICE

L. Timmel Duchamp

1.

She didn't belong in the world. Alice knew this as a fact by the time she reached middle age, but she had always felt it for as long as she could remember. Her being lacked some vital element, as though she were a shadow enjoying physical extension that could be touched and weighed and measured and yet did not add up to a solid body boasting independent existence. Others might see her, but few registered her presence. She thought of her lack as one not of soul, but of heft. Of gravity. Of placedness. Her self, simply, possessed no proper place in the world.

She belonged somewhere else. Or perhaps nowhere, nowhere at all. And so she thought of herself as the world's mistake. A century earlier, she believed, the mistake could not have been made.

In its use of its technologies, the world, she considered, had a lot to answer for.

2.

Alice realized early that most people took their belonging in the world for granted. Perhaps the world did not always take as much notice of

them as they'd like, but it recognized the ontological rightness of their presence and never prompted so much as a fleeting doubt about *that*. A few people, though, exerted so much heft that they were nearly worlds in themselves, immense wells of gravity around which others orbited. Alice's grandmother, who cared for her from the time of her emergence from an incubator until she started kindergarten, seemed to Alice as much a place in the world as a person. A lap, after all, was a place, though it only existed in special conditions subject to swift and sudden change; and so, surely, the whole of a person could be a place, too.

Her grandmother would open a pint jar of beets she had pickled months before, and she and Alice would eat the smooth shiny flesh with homemade bread thickly buttered for lunch. They would sit at the kitchen table, spearing the slices of beet with their forks, and the energy of a powerful pull would vibrate through Alice's being, as though the fragile threads of her insubstantial self had been drawn into her grandmother's gravitational field, exerting a force nearly strong enough to keep her from drifting thinly away into air, a force that promised to ground her in love and blood and earth. Feeling in that moment as though she belonged, she would admire the way the beets shone like jewels and wonder how each slice could be so thrillingly smooth even as it revealed a pattern that reminded her of a tree trunk that had been cut close to the ground, like the rough-textured stump beside the garage, on which she often laid red, gold, and orange leaves and the glossy horse-chestnuts the squirrels would steal the minute she turned her back. Alice observed that her grandmother saw this and all other connections and resemblances; and she understood that her grandmother encompassed the totality of her world. And for all the time that world included only the two of them, Alice inhaled happiness with every breath and knew that the world was beautiful, however tenuous her place in it might be.

When Alice was thirty-four she decided that her grandmother had given her child's self heft not through noticing her and taking her seriously (which she did), but simply because someone who was in and of herself a place could create the illusion of belonging for anyone her field of gravity touched. She wondered how many people who didn't belong in the world soothed their suspicions that they didn't by finding people who are places and establishing orbits around them.

Someone, she thought, should do a study.

3.

Every family has its canon of stories, and in Alice's family, the story of her premature birth on the very border of viability ranked. Every time the story was told, her mother or father or uncle or aunt would say, "We were afraid we were going to lose you, Alice. We didn't know if you would make it. The doctor said you wouldn't." At this point in the story's narration, when she was young, Alice would hide her head in her grandmother's lap, aware of everyone staring at her. And then she would think, *They know I don't be-*

long. Once she overheard her Aunt Nola commenting to her grandfather on Alice's shocking skinniness and abnormal bashfulness. "I bet it has something to do with her being so premature. She was always too thin. All those weeks in that incubator, Pa, and her hardly weighing so much as a pound. It's marked her, anybody can see that. It don't matter how much potato soup Ma gets her to eat, everything just runs through her. She'll always be a skinny runt with arms and legs like toothpicks."

Nola had been eleven when Alice was born, and around the time Alice started kindergarten she'd been an Elvis Presley fan, always talking on the square black bakelite telephone and drinking Pepsi-Cola, which rid-dled her teeth with cavities. She wore bobby socks and loafers until she graduated from high school and orange lipstick and blue suede pumps with three-inch heels when she went to work for the phone company. Carefully closing and locking the bathroom door, Alice would examine and handle her aunt's special paraphernalia—eyelash curlers, auburn eyebrow pencils, and tweezers. Unlike her aunt's lipstick and compact, which she carried in her purse and often left out in open sight, these were kept hidden in a drawer, secret implements too private to be spoken of. And yet everyone in the family knew about Alice's spastic colon and what the doctor had said after she'd endured all the tests he'd ordered. Her aunt and others explained all that they didn't understand about her as something to do with her colon. Every time she heard them talking about it, she'd have to double over because her colon would start spazzing and twisting around in her belly like a snake tying itself up in knots.

She carried Nola's comment around with her, tucked away in one of the many mental pockets she used to reserve items needing thorough examination and handling. Eventually it provided her with the key to theorizing her out-of-placeness. In its essence, her theory was simple. She had not been *meant* to be born, to survive, to live in this world. There had been a mistake somewhere. She articulated it, of course, in the passive voice, to avoid implicating God. For although she attended church every Sunday and a parochial school with religious lessons every weekday, she could not manage to speak the thought, even to herself, that God had not intended her to be born, much less the idea that medical technology had thwarted God's intention. Her teachers did their best to instruct her that God knew who she was and everything about her, but Alice, with all her lack of heft, found the idea preposterous. From about the age of eight she had grasped that "God's Will" signified anything and everything that happened or, occasionally, a special interpretation of reality. Her teachers talked often about how God's Will determined everything that ever happened to sparrows. Once she raised her hand and said, "Mrs. Covington, does that go for ants and flies and worms, too? Does God care for them, also?" Mrs. Covington's mouth twitched into a sickly rictus of a smile. "God cares for *all* his creatures, Alice."

"And rattlesnakes? And mosquitoes? And crocodiles? What about rabid dogs? And what about Cain? If God cared about Cain, why did he look down on his fruits and vegetables and praise Abel's stinky old dead animals—"

But Mrs. Covington had had enough. She told Alice that asking those kinds of questions came very close to mocking God and assigned her five

extra Bible verses to learn by heart. Alice obediently memorized the verses, but Mrs. Covington's disapproval imbued with special clarity her understanding that God was capricious and arbitrary, which was why His Will generally meant very unpleasant things for everybody all around. So although she would not put it past God to have Willed her not to be born, for as long as she believed in God (i.e., until about the age of seventeen) she believed that in fact he had changed His Mind about bringing her into existence, probably at the last second, and had then forgotten to alter His Plan so as to make the change fit into the Greater Scheme of Things. He might notice how every sparrow in the world fared, but she felt virtually certain she had slipped under His radar.

Alice's grandfather might declare he was mad at God after her grandmother died, but Alice understood that God's willing a death had to be a different kind of exercise of will than letting someone slip into the world who shouldn't have. And yet the idea of a forgetful God, who knew what every sparrow, worm, and fly was doing, made no sense to her. In her very first religion class in the first grade they'd had to memorize the attributes of God, one of which was omniscience. Every year Alice tested her new teacher. "Does God ever make mistakes?" The answer, always the same, got frostier and frostier as Alice rose through the grades.

By seventh grade, she knew better than to ask.

4.

When her grandmother died, Alice found herself alone and bereft of a massy body to orbit, weighing barely enough to sustain consciousness of, much less presence in, the world. She often drifted away, her heft so tenuous that between one heartbeat and the next she slipped briefly out of the world to a place that held, to her untutored perception, only images, a jumble subject to shifting as swiftly and unpredictably as the tiles in her cardboard and plastic kaleidoscope.

Her grandmother lingered in her dreams for months. Repeatedly Alice wakened into happiness that shattered in the inevitable moment of remembering, taunting her with a loss she could explain to no one, teaching her that her dreams were false. Her grandmother had known she didn't belong, had noticed and hadn't had to lie about it. To everyone else, she was just nervous. High-strung. Overly sensitive. In need of lightening up: everyone agreed.

On Sunday afternoons at the cemetery, Alice helped her grandfather snip the soft velvety grass and tend the brave, bright petunias and geraniums surrounding the gravestone that lay flush to the earth. The stone never seemed right to her; its pink and gray surface held such a polish that it resembled a mirror on which had been stamped her grandmother's name and dates in unsuitably ornate characters, not a signifier either of loss or of who the woman buried there had been. Still, other than a few photographs and keepsakes, it was all that remained of her.

Alice needed to attend the grave alone, to visit without the distraction

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of others' presence and without the pressure of having always to give way to someone else's grief for a woman so many had loved. So Alice became devious. She learned how to fool the adults surveilling her whereabouts, which buses to take, and how to cross the four-lane highway; and she acquired an indifference to walking or bicycling several miles in one day, which previously had been beyond her.

Although the stone radiated cold even when the sun beat down on it, Alice needed to lay her head on it, needed to thrust her fingers into the grass, right into the ground. Being in touch with the grave, she sensed, kept her from drifting out of the world into the other place that so often beckoned to her, where nothing had heft, where everything constantly moved and collided in a chaos devoid of meaning. She hoped that making the physical link would bring her into contact with some small trace of her grandmother remaining in the world, which she thought might be possible simply because her grandmother had had more heft than anyone she had ever known.

On her grandmother's birthday almost a year and a half after her death, Alice lay, as she often did, with her head on the stone and her fingers dug into the sod. The rays of the sun soaked into the side of her face, dazzling her with a red brilliance that warmed and penetrated the closed, thin lids of her eyes. She visualized a yellow sheet cake decorated with sugary white icing, festooned with small pink roses and sixty-five candles, and remembered how because her grandmother had had asthma, she had always needed Alice to help blow out her candles. "Happy birthday to you," she sang softly. "Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday dear Grandma, happy birthday to you." But though she had her eyes closed, pretending, Alice knew there was no birthday cake, no candles, no birthday at all, even though it was May first. Her heart ached. She sighed, and her sigh turned into a sob. "If only I could be with you always," she said. "I hate it here without you. Hate it hate it hate it." Her eyes streamed. "I'm tired of being here by myself, Gramma. I want to go home with you. Please. Let me come to you. You know I don't belong here."

"Alice?"

That voice! Alice squeezed her eyes more tightly shut.

"Alice, I want you to listen to me."

Alice grew aware of the pulse of blood pumping through her veins—in her wrists, in her throat, in her belly, in her temples. The sound of it thudded in her ears like a hammer that knew nothing about stopping. She thought that if she opened her eyes her vision would be swimming in blood.

"Alice? That is you, isn't it?"

Alice opened her eyes and sat up. The sun blinded her. She held her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes. "Gramma?" A woman stood nearby. She had gray hair and wrinkles in her face, and she had the right voice; but she was wearing pants, her hair was wrong, and she wasn't as pillowy and large as her grandmother. Death, Alice thought, might change people. Might make them look a little different. Younger, healthier, thinner. And who could it be if not her grandmother? She frowned up at the woman, uncertain.

"Alice, Alice. Who else would be here on May first?" The woman knelt and held open her arms. "Come to me, little Apple. Come give me a hug."

Alice did not hesitate. The only persons who ever called her "Apple" were her grandmother and grandfather. She nestled close, her head tucked into the hollow of the old woman's throat. The arms, the bosom, the lap were not her grandmother's, nor was the old woman's smell. But all of these were good, all surprisingly intimate and familiar. This woman wasn't her grandmother but offered some trace of her. A trace sadly without heft, but better than nothing of her grandmother at all.

Alice the Older held the girl in her arms and laid kisses in the fine, tangled hair that smelled of sun and earth and Prell shampoo. The slightness of Alice the Younger made an ache stir in her belly. *Sentimental old fool. You're indulging in narcissism here, even if you didn't expect to find her in this place, even if you'd forgotten all about this moment.*

She had expected this visit to the town she had grown up in, a place where no one of her blood had lived for so many years now, to kindle old memories and feelings long laid to rest. But nothing looked familiar. Her grandparents' house had been torn down. The house on Wolf Road and two of its neighbors had been replaced by condos. The Lutheran school was gone. And there were no cornfields anywhere. Only the river remained, dirty and muddy as it had always been, its dam the familiar site of her longest-running recurring dream. It had seemed reasonable to visit the town since her travel had brought her so close, but the only intimate memory left physically standing seemed to be the small, no longer used graveyard surrounded on three sides by used car lots and fast-food franchises.

Though she hadn't remembered the encounter before she had stepped into the graveyard, as soon as she saw that small girl flung down over the grave she recalled first how she used to come here, alone, and then the conversation she once thought she had had with her dead grandmother. The girl now talked softly into her shoulder, murmuring her longing, her need, her desperate sense of wrongness. Alice the Older closed her eyes and hid from the dazzle; she concentrated on the girl. Alice had never had a child. And this child—she *knew* this child as no mother could. She imagined taking her with her—out of the girl's proper time. But she knew that doing so could not be right. It might possibly create a temporal paradox. And if that happened, how then could she become the person she was now?

Alice reeled under an attack of vertigo. Listening to the little girl, she remembered that she had always thought she didn't belong anywhere, that her very being had been a mistake. The little girl spoke of that. And of premature birth and incubators. . . .

When the sun began to sink in the sky, Alice the Older told the little girl to go back, go back home to Wolf Road. "You have to stay in your world," she said. "But remember, little Apple, remember that there's a reason for that. A reason I can't take you with me. So go back now, go back to your world."

The little girl cried; the little girl resisted. Finally, though, she left, and a cold breeze ruffled the tall, unmowed weeds growing carelessly between the gravestones. Alice's pulse beat in her throat. She saw that the place where the girl had been was no longer manicured, that the flowers

had vanished. And her grandmother's headstone now lay between two others, all three of them markers of burials Alice had attended at different times of her life. Alice swallowed, as though to rid herself of the heaviness in her chest by ridding her throat of the lump that emotional constraint had put there, and read the inscription chiseled into the polished pink granite. All around her, the weeds ruffled under the whip of the wind. Alice imagined that one good gust would blow her away, into the other dimension where she had long imagined she really belonged. *They call abandoned towns ghost towns. But what do you call an abandoned graveyard?*

Alice could not remember whether Alice the Younger had gotten in trouble for getting home so late. But she did know that she had never told a soul about the meeting.

5.

Away at college, Alice found friends and fell in love and married. And for a while she believed that her problem had been simply a case of social alienation, of having grown up in an environment too small and parochial to accommodate her differences in personality, perspective, and imagination. Blooming, she convinced herself that the thin stalk of her psyche thrusting up from the world's roots, however tenuously, anchored her in the world's soil, thin and poor as it might be.

When at twenty-four she met Alice aged seven, the hair on the back of her neck stirred with a dread she could only disavow. And just as at seven and ten she had not recognized her older self, so at nineteen she did not recognize the woman of thirty-nine when she faced her in a restroom in New Orleans. But when at thirty-one she met herself at fifty-three, she neither denied nor forgot the encounter. She recognized the fifty-three-year-old woman because she so strongly resembled her mother. They met on Rialto Beach, on the coast of Washington State. The water glistened like the smoothest, bluest silk, brushed at decorous intervals by soft gushes of white foam. Afterwards, Alice the Younger decided that both of them had been sucked into some other temporality, not that either of them had strayed into the other's proper time.

The older Alice had been walking south, stepping from one large slippery rock to the next, moving toward Hole-in-the-Wall. The younger Alice, who had just passed through the hole, saw the sun full on the other's face. She halted, balanced on the flat top of an algae-slick boulder, and, hand at her throat, stared at her older self. The other stopped, too, and removed the blue-mirrored sunglasses. After a long moment in which the sound of the surf filled their ears, Alice the Older said, "We're really going to have to stop meeting like this."

Later, Alice the Younger realized the cliché was meant to be a joke. In the moment, though, she felt not the slightest tickle of amusement, but instead a powerful sense of déjà vu—and a fear fueled by her understanding that something was terribly, terribly wrong. Déjà vu, of course, though caused by the misfiring of a synapse, gives the mistaken impression that one has dreamed the moment one is experiencing. But while Alice had not dreamed

about meeting herself on Rialto Beach, she had in fact dreamed often about the particular dimension in which she now found herself.

The ocean held constant, and the rocks on which they stood, and both Alices. But the sky fractured into disjointed shards, zigging and zagging down into the earth and below the surface of the water, every misshapen fragment glittering with sinister, nauseating beauty. Alice and Alice knew she was nowhere, nowhere at all, her being as evanescent as the shifting shards of the world around her, constantly moving, appearing and disappearing, growing and shrinking, in an unceasing parade of change. Alice the Younger held out her hands to Alice the Older. "Touch me, please touch me. I'm so afraid, so afraid I'm not real. That nothing is real. Is this where we really belong? Not in the world, but here?"

Alice the Older said, "In the chaos that preceded the world, before there was gravity, before the separation of light and dark, before there were particles and waves and the weak force and the strong?" She took Alice the Younger's hand, and as they looked into one another's eyes, Alice the Younger wept. She knew then that what she'd suspected as a child had been true, however much her adult self had refused to believe it. A bitter taste filled her mouth.

Alice the Younger said, "It's no place, you're saying. It's nowhere."

"So we can only go back, Alice, go back to the world."

And back they went, to the calm and ordered beauty of Hole-in-the-Wall, where the sky arched in an unbroken vault of blue, safe and certain. Alice stared down at her shoes and saw pink and green anemones clinging to the sides of the rocks, living jewels of wonder, possessing a heft that sang the hymn of belonging. Alice saw how perfect it was and ached, the way one aches for a passionate love irretrievably lost.

6.

Love, Alice's grandmother taught her, was what mattered most; from love came goodness, and from goodness love. Deep down, Alice always believed this, though for most of her adult life she told herself it was bullshit.

Alice's grandmother taught her about love most often when in the presence of food. "Love means forgiving, Apple." Her grandmother held the golden-crusted loaf she'd made on Saturday to her chest and drew the long serrated blade through the bread toward herself. Gramma had learned to cut bread from her grandmother, on the farm long, long ago. Everyone else had to cut the bread on a board, because it was too dangerous to do it the way Gramma did. "I can't stand to watch her *do that*," Alice's mother said once, appealing in vain to Alice's father to get his mother to be more careful in her handling of knives. But that was how Gramma had grown up, and she'd never hurt herself yet.

"Love means forgiving the ones who do wrong to you. Like Jesus did. If your heart is big enough, you can do it, Apple. And you'll be better for it, even if it doesn't look that way at the time." Gramma didn't use a cutting board to slice apples, either. She'd pull the paring knife through the fruit, straight toward her pillowy bosom. And she'd hand a thin, shapely slice to Alice, who'd just have to say, copying her grandfather, "An apple a day

keeps the doctor away!" though she knew that wasn't true for her grandmother, who had to go to the doctor's a lot despite the fact that she did eat an apple just about every day. "Everyone needs to be loved," her grandmother said, paring one beautiful slice after another, "but what most people don't understand is that everybody needs to love, too. Loving is as important as being loved. And in some ways is better than being loved." And Alice would think of how passionately she loved her grandmother and nod wisely and say she knew exactly what her grandmother was saying. Loving her grandmother was her world; there was nothing she wouldn't do to make her grandmother happy.

"If you love well enough, Apple, you'll be good. And if you're good, you'll also be loved." Her grandmother was separating egg whites as she said this, which she had promised Alice she could whip with the electric beater and which the recipe for angel food cake said must be whipped dry. Alice said, "But aren't there people so good that nobody can love them?"

"What do you mean, Apple?" asked her grandmother. "Who are you talking about?" And Alice said, "You know, Gramma. People like the minister. And Mr. Becker, the seventh-grade teacher who's so strict. And the church elders."

"That's not goodness," Gramma said. "Not the goodness I'm talking about." And slowly, slowly, Alice got the idea that the goodness they talked about in school and in church wasn't the *real* goodness, the goodness of love.

Later, Alice decided that her parents' idea of goodness wasn't the real goodness, either. And as she grew older, none of the goodness held up to her in this place or that measured up to the idea of goodness her grandmother had taught her. Persons of authority almost invariably failed her. And as Alice spent her life looking for her grandmother everywhere in the world, she elided the idea of heft in the world with the idea of the goodness of love—and never once suspected that she had done so until well after her sixtieth birthday.

As had her grandmother, Daniel offered an elision of heft in the world with the goodness of love. Alice only realized this years after she had married him. He never used words like "love" and "goodness." He said, "All anyone can do is look into the other's eyes and hope for the best." But Daniel's idea of *looking into* and *hoping* encompassed a world as solid and holding as a lap. And Alice again found herself grounded in love and blood and earth.

She had been lucky, she eventually understood. Lucky that, although she did not belong in the world, she had found persons of love and heft to anchor and keep her from flying apart, wild and disjunct, into the place where sense and love could not live.

7.

After meeting herself at Hole-in-the-Wall, Alice (the Younger) almost told Daniel about the experience. She thought about how her older self had known she would meet her there and had implied that such meetings happened often. And she wondered how her older self knew that the "crazy chaos" where they had met "preceded the world" and was nowhere.

Did this mean that in years to come she would find a way to make sense of what she often felt must be a delusion? She had never told Daniel anything about it. Daniel was a physicist. And it would sound like New Age craziness, she'd thought. But might not a physicist make sense of it, at least as much sense of it as her older self seemed to have done?

Only a week after the meeting at Hole-in-the-Wall, Alice dropped again into a long frozen instant of time where past and future penetrated her consciousness of the present. Her fingers were keying numbers into a project's budget file. And in the fraction of an instant lying between one keystroke and the next, she was slung into a moment that seemed to stretch subjectively into hours of time, where multiple moments of herself in the world overlapped and collided—and then slammed back into ordinary life, where her fingers still marched over the numeric keypad without the slightest hesitation, toiling on as if time had not fractured, as if no interruption had come between her and the world.

How often did such fractures strike? She admitted that they happened more often than she remembered. Usually she kept doggedly on with whatever she was doing and either forgot or dismissed such occurrences as momentary mental aberrations. And when it happened while lying in bed, waiting to fall to sleep, it struck her as an aborted drop into a hypnogogic state that should have led to REM sleep but didn't. At one point in her life—before she recognized the chaos as a locus to which she would always be drawn—she assumed that the fractures were the result of her accessing hypnogogic images with unusual frequency, perhaps as a consequence of certain neurons firing by mistake when she was awake instead of en route to REM sleep. Some of the images, though, recurred, coming from seemingly nowhere, striking without reference to anything but themselves: an enormous plain of dried brown chaff, tundra stretching as far as the eye could see; a length of rusted railroad tracks, in which a sharp, bloody spike thrust out of the rail bed, impaling the jagged shards of gray and purple sky rushing down to meet it; a jumble of boulders that made her think of death every time she saw them—cold, gray, and lifeless, shining and lonely before a thick backdrop of total, endless night. These images she saw often enough that she began to remember them and thus notice the fractures.

Daniel knew she felt she didn't "belong." This he took for a permanent flaw in her psyche, a wound, perhaps, of a difficult childhood. If she were to tell him about meeting Alice the Older at Hole-in-the-Wall, she'd have to tell him also about her experience of fractures. All of these were simply mental events: perhaps with neurological causes, perhaps simply daydreams. What was there, after all, to actually explain? The evidence was subjective, all of it occurring within the precincts of her mind. Physics could have nothing to say about any of it.

8.

Alice returned often to Rialto Beach, hoping each time for another encounter with herself. She had in mind that certain physical places themselves made the encounters possible and that Rialto Beach was one of

those places. She reasoned that the encounters always happened in places she happened to visit at two different times and that therefore the places themselves must be instrumental in throwing temporally discrete instances of her self together. Although the crazy chaos was nearly unbearable in the moment, she nevertheless longed to meet her older self again. Her older self, she thought, could help her understand. Her older self could comfort her. Her older self knew even better than Daniel the wound that made her an exile.

But though she got to know Rialto Beach well, she encountered her self there only at fifty-three, on the other side of that same meeting. So Rialto Beach was no magic window. And the meetings, when they occurred, were not often comforting. Being ignored by her nineteen year-old-self in the restroom of Napoleon House made her feel lonelier than ever—and a little bit angry and resentful, too, because it reminded her of how at nineteen she had allowed herself to believe that she had been wrong to think she had no place in the world, that it had only been a matter of finding the people she belonged with, through whom she would discover the sense of place that had been lacking. Returning to the courtyard just as the waiter was serving their Pym's Cups, her heart felt heavy as a stone. "I was just remembering the first time we came here," she told Daniel. "And what a horrible, shallow person I was then." How else to describe her sense of alienation from her past self?

Daniel only laughed and said that that must explain what he'd seen in her at the time. Alice thought of the young woman, slimmer than her older self, well on her way to a major hangover, staring self-absorbed into the mirror. And then she thought of her own constant longing to meet an older self she believed had the answers, and wondered if there were any difference. She was lonely now. Maybe her older self wasn't. It stood to reason, given the difference age could make, that her older self had other needs altogether.

And even if she did meet her older self again, it wouldn't change anything. She'd still be Alice; she'd still be out of place in the world. The self could not, after all, reach across time and transfer the knowledge, understanding, and wisdom of one moment to another. And so Alice finally gave up trying to make a meeting happen.

9.

Alice was sixty-one when she nursed her mother through the final stage of raging, metastasized cancer. For three months her entire existence centered on making her mother as comfortable as possible. The rest of the world blurred around her, unreal, without interest, a set of inputs that abraded her senses when she noticed it. She strained to read her mother's slightest movement, to understand every grunt, whimper, and syllable, and to intuit her mother's every immediate need with a precision and alacrity verging on the telepathic. Ferocious in her will to serve her mother's needs, she let no one and nothing come between herself and

them. She could not stop the cancer, but all else bowed to her will. And so the world shrank to her mother and herself. And for a while it was almost as though she had acquired heft.

That brief sense of heft carried a price, for her mother's death left her feeling the lack more sharply than she ever had before. For months she flitted in and out of the place of chaos, uprooted and drifting, tethered by only the thinnest of filaments to blood and earth. And for a while she wondered if perhaps she might be schizophrenic, and whether the sense of lacking heft might be the root cause of the severest forms of psychosis. Everyone she knew saw her as a woman mourning the loss of her mother.

If Daniel had had just a little less heft, she would have slipped out of the world entirely. Perhaps the extremity of this dependence should have frightened her. But she was so caught up in the chaos and her desperate wish to understand that she did not pay it the slightest attention.

10.

As her mother's executor, Alice sorted her mother's papers and disposed of her possessions. She took from her mother's house three boxes of photographs and slides, some of them more than a hundred years old. Usually there was nothing more to identify the subject of the photos than a date on the frame or the reverse. Two adolescent girls in long dresses and hats held hands by the side of a lake; 1907 had been penciled on the reverse. Who were these girls? Alice wondered. Would she recognize their names if she knew what they were? Certainly they looked as though they had belonged in their world, endowed with the heft that any ordinary person enjoyed. But did that mean anything now, almost a century later? Alice shuffled through the pictures and wondered. There was an order to the world she could see in the photos, an order absent to the place of chaos.

And what did love have to do with any of it?

Tucked away at the back of a shelf in her mother's closet, Alice found a worn and cracked black leather book with the word **Photographs** stamped on its cover in gold. Only a fraction of its heavy black pages had photographs glued to them. Her mother had never shown her the album, never mentioned having it. Alice recognized none of the people or places in the pictures, but knew, judging by the clothing, they could not possibly postdate World War I. All were carefully posed, both children and adults whether in couples, solo, or in groups. Women held one another or were shown picking fruit from trees or sharing the excitement of reading a letter together while standing against a wrought-iron fence. Often the men wore suits they looked uncomfortable in, and they posed handling a fishing rod, or standing near an early model of an automobile, or holding the leash of a chimpanzee dressed in a bellhop's uniform. A whole series of photos showed women in long black dresses and white aprons, solemn and poised, with palm trees exotically soaring behind them. The sole photo with a caption showed one of these women standing before a palm tree,

a bicyclist riding past in the background; *herself in uniform* was written in script below it.

Who, Alice wondered, was “herself”? Alice never knew she had had relatives so long ago who had lived (however briefly) in a place where palm trees grew. Surely her mother would not have kept an album that had belonged to someone who had not been a blood ancestor?

Alice tried to imagine the history of this old, unfinished album, the story of how it had come to live on the shelf in her mother’s closet. Her mother had been the executor of her own mother’s estate. She must, Alice speculated, have found it in her mother’s possessions, or perhaps gotten it from Aunt Sally, an unmarried, childless woman who had been the repository of old family treasures. Had her mother known who was in the photos? If she had, why hadn’t she shown it to Alice? And if she hadn’t, why hadn’t she been able to discard the album (or even the loose, uncollected old photos of unknown men, women, and children jumbled together with more recent photos)?

Alice could not bring herself to toss the photo album into the trash. It could be of no real use or interest to her, and yet as a collection of photos, it possessed a certain authenticity, an integrity she could not question, presenting its images as documents of the world as it had once been.

Object that it was, worn, abandoned, unanchored in facts, names, and verifications: still it had heft. It belonged in the world, though the world had altered so radically—perhaps *because* the world of the album, the world that had made the album and of which the album was made, no longer existed. Might that be what gave it heft?

Pondering this question, Alice realized that her sense that an old thing could have heft did not extend to many old films. Cut off from the local cultural context in which they had been produced, the ability of their audience to make sense of them had become so attenuated as to make the flimsiness of scenery and actors speaking lines in scenes cut and pasted and dubbed so apparent as to threaten to reveal that only imagination and visual enchantment had ever held them together in the first place. And yet she saw nothing flimsy in the photos, all of which had been staged, and some of which distinctly reminded her of the early silent films, of situations constructed to resemble scenes the people taking the photos wanted to imitate—desiring, apparently, to reproduce the images they had seen at the movies, desiring in some way to make themselves into actors. She understood these desires—surely such modeling characterized American Modernity and formed the basis of the advertising industry, of television, of film: real people imitating the figures on the screen. Shaping their lives with careful, sometimes obsessive attention. As for the converse . . . film, after all, did not imitate life. It never had, and Alice could not imagine that it ever would.

She struggled to draw insight from the contrast she perceived, but it eluded her. When she tried describing the contrast to Daniel, he said that the photos were images of real persons and places and the films were not, and it was as simple as opposing reality to fantasy. Alice didn’t think it was that simple. Clearly the photos incorporated the kind of fantasy that pervaded “real life”; and yet, for Alice, that didn’t make them false, but

added an inexplicable depth—maybe even the heft she felt so lacking in herself. Daniel's reasoning certainly didn't explain why she, like the old, abandoned, and now flimsy films, lacked heft.

As though she had stepped out of one of those films, from a world constituted by two dimensions and black and white, and was trying to pass herself off as solidly and substantially human.

11.

At sixty-four, when Alice, attending a conference in Chicago, made a quick trip to the town she had grown up in to revisit the scenes of her childhood, she went to the old, no longer used graveyard only because every other place she had known had been razed and replaced by condos, strip malls, and parking lots. Meeting ten-year-old Alice, grieving at her grandmother's grave, Alice only then remembered that it was her grandmother's birthday. And the child's pain reopened the wound of a loss that she had lived with for fifty-five years. Comforting the child, she comforted herself.

"Little Apple, little Apple," she murmured to her scrawny, sobbing, younger self. Alice ached with desolation but she refused the temptation to take the child with her.

Alone in the wild, untended graveyard, Alice knelt in the weeds and cleared the three stones so that she could read the names and dates engraved on them. For several long moments, her being hummed with memories. The people buried here had given her life—charitably, however mistakenly. Her body remembered Apple's search for gravity and laid itself down on the stones, her head on her father's, her heart on her grandmother's, her knees on her grandfather's. Had she given them enough love? she asked herself. She thought of the rows of gleaming pint jars filled with slices of pickled beet lined up on the shelves in her grandparents' basement, tangible evidence of her grandmother's love—for her family, for good food, for the homely potential of the vegetables themselves that might otherwise have shriveled up and rotted unnoticed except by the worms and beetles that composted starchy roots left to rot in the soil. And for the first time she wondered whether she, Alice, gave enough love to the world. She thought of how often she recognized the world's beauty but felt shut out from it, unable to feel it in her own self. She had wanted the world to accept her, to make her feel wanted by it. But she had never thought it was hers to love and had thus failed even to try.

The chill of dusk crept over the graveyard. Alice lay motionless against the stones. Her grandmother had told her; but Alice hadn't understood. She had loved this person and that one, and she had looked to them for heft. But for someone who did not naturally belong in the world, loving only individuals could never be enough.

Alice thought of how often she got caught up in the jagged chaos out of time. She considered her failure in the light of that fact. And she concluded that it was too late for her to do anything about it now.

In the month following her encounter with her forty-six-year-old self, Alice, now seventy-two, thought obsessively about two things. One of these was death. Because she could not recall ever having met a self older than she was now, she knew that she might have come to the end of her encounters with herself and that this might be because her own life would soon be ending.

Although her obsession with this thought depressed her, she found it less painful than the second thought preoccupying her. And to stop herself from endless, do-nothing brooding, she assigned herself the task of setting her affairs and possessions in order. She did not tell Daniel what she was doing. But she did not conceal it, either.

And so it was that the morning after a dinner party she hauled half a dozen boxes of old photos and slides down to the dining room table and methodically sorted them into piles. One pile contained images of her mother's side of the family; a second pile, images of her father's; a third pile, images of the generations succeeding her grandparents' generation; and a fourth pile, images of Daniel's extended family. The fifth pile consisted of everything left over—images of their friends, places they had visited, and miscellaneous things that had interested them. Alice intended to make packages for various nieces and nephews; and if she had the time and stamina, she would label all the images she recognized.

"What is all *this*?"

Alice looked up from the work, glad to take a break. So much bending and reaching was making her back ache. Marian looked like she'd just woken up, her hair tangled, the skin on her face creased. "I need some coffee," she said, turning around and going back into the kitchen.

An old friend about twenty-five years younger than Alice, Marian was visiting for a month on a working vacation. They had first met during Marian's internship at the arts foundation where Alice worked. Discovering a shared passion for performance art, they'd developed a low-key friendship attending On the Boards events together. Marian usually stayed with Alice and Daniel when work brought her to town. She had once told Alice that she would probably never have even noticed she was "there" if it hadn't been for the On the Boards poster she'd mounted on her cubicle wall.

Marian returned with the thermos and a cup and sat at the end of the table, well away from the mess. Alice passed her the old black leather album. "Take a look at that," she said. "I found it in my mother's closet but haven't the faintest idea who any of the people in the photos are."

"There's a story here," Marian said when she'd looked at roughly half of the pictures. "These photos offer traces of a recognizable world, but one that has become opaque now that that world and the people in it are gone and no one bothered to write down their names or the stories the photos document."

"And everyone thinks a picture is worth a thousand words," Alice said as she continued with the sorting.

"People put a lot of store in genealogy," Marian said. "But if these people are your ancestors, then the question arises whether their pictures have greater significance to you as a sign of a general cultural history in your roots or as a sign of your specific genetic—genealogical—history."

Alice stared at Marian, whose gaze remained bent on the photos pasted to the heavy black pages of the album. Her impulse was to say she did not feel she had "roots" at all. Her only sense of connection with blood relatives was and had always been with those individuals with whom she experienced close personal contact. She looked down at the picture in her hand, a yellowed color photo of her father holding herself at about eighteen months. What she saw in it, she realized, amounted to two individuals in close relation, not figures in relation to a world. Everything else looked like backdrop.

"Do you remember what you said at dinner last night? When Gerald was talking about how extreme and visible the disappearance of habitats and species had already become now in the Arctic Circle?"

Marian looked up from the album. "You mean about how the disappearance from public discourse of everything but individuals renders the elimination of species as well as entire human communities invisible and meaningless?"

Marian had claimed that the *National Geographic* mentality had made even nonhuman species visible only as collections of individuals. But species couldn't survive as a collection of discrete individuals—whether as personalities living in zoos or radio-tagged numbered members of populations inhabiting wildlife preserves. "Isn't your question about the album related to the atomization you were talking about? That we mainly think of people as atomized individuals perhaps embedded in but essentially distinct from the world rather than as being part of the world and engaged in its processes?"

Marian looked at her with what Alice uncomfortably recognized as surprise. Alice imagined her quickly revising a quarter-century's assumptions about her friend's intellectual capacity—and then told herself not to be an idiot. Marian had never treated her with anything but respect for her intelligence.

"I think I see what you're getting at. As blood ancestors, distinct personalities whose genes you carry, they are first and foremost actors on a stage, bold-as-life characters surrounded by a simulation of 'real life'—analogous to the individual personalities that are all anyone can relate to in public discourse, where the complex processes of the world are flattened to a simulation that can be faked, the way the backdrop for television reporters is faked to make it look as though they're on the scene rather than standing on a sound-stage in a studio. Whereas looking at your ancestors as part of the world that made you . . . that's something else."

Alice glanced at the album Marian's hands held open. Would the heft of the world it revealed appear less if she knew who the figures in the photos were in relation to herself? Or even if she just had names to attach to the figures and stories to attach to the names?

Alice thought the question interesting but felt wary of applying any of

its possible answers to her own problem. At seventy-two she was a little late trying to do anything about it, anyway. She had been out of place in the world for so many years the idea of generating heft now could only be academic.

13.

The second thought preoccupying her came to the fore once she'd gotten all her affairs and papers in order. Daniel, noticing a pattern in her activity, had questioned her closely about her most recent doctor's appointment but had let the subject rest when her answers indicated that only the usual chronic complaints were plaguing her. She could think of nothing she needed to say to anyone, no particular task she felt it urgent to finish. She had a few near and dear relationships, but no deep connection with the world. The world did not need her; the world did not *know* her. Her passing out of it might mean something to a few individuals, but it would mean nothing to the world. And why, she asked herself, should it? The world she had been living in had never been hers.

Though she ceased to think much about the likely approach of her death, the second matter on her mind fairly haunted her. What if she had been wrong to tell her younger self in encounter after encounter that they could only go back, go back to the world? What if she had been wrong to keep her selves separate? To not do what she could to explore, in league with her other selves, the place of chaos that lurked just outside the world? For years Alice had reasoned that every moment that they were face to face they were out of time, out of reality, out of any place at all. "It's no place, you're saying. It's nowhere." "So we can only go back, Alice, go back to the world." But what if she'd been wrong? What if the place she believed to be nowhere actually offered entry into another world—the one into which she should actually have been born?

She judged this question, also, to be academic. But it felt so real and pressing that each iteration of it caused her pain. She thought of little Apple and how she had turned her away, the older Alice comforting while re-buffing the younger one. Maybe her selves had been meant to combine into one, instead of being allowed to fragment into so many. What if she had taken ten-year-old Alice home with her? Or if seventy-two-year-old Alice had merged at Hole-in-the-Wall with her fifty-three-year-old self? Maybe she would not have drowned like Narcissus. Maybe she had been thinking of the wrong story altogether.

14.

Two and a half years later, Alice met herself at age three. She and Daniel were visiting a friend in Buffalo and decided to play tourist at Niagara Falls. The two of them inadvertently got separated, and Alice found herself looking on a scene straight out of a photograph she'd sent to her

niece Flora. Three-year-old Alice was holding her father's hand. Old Alice stood off to the side and watched her mother take their picture with a quaint Kodak camera. She trailed after the family grouping and followed them discreetly back to Uncle Bob and Aunt Alta's house. Alice had never before stayed so long in her younger self's world, nor strayed so far from her point of entry. She felt like an intruder likely to be discovered and expelled at any moment.

Little Alice was playing in a sandbox in the backyard, happily alone and absorbed, when Alice approached and dropped to her knees in the grass nearby. "Hello, Apple," she said to the child. "What's that you're building?"

Little Alice flashed a smile at Old Alice and offered her a long and involved story. On and on it went, the story, about a host of imaginary persons and creatures and what the various mounds and trenches Alice had formed in the sandbox represented inside the world of the story. And so the child prattled and gestured and built the world she was describing. Alice could not remember herself ever having been so happy.

"There's something I want to show you," Alice said to the child. Trusting and curious, the child sat in her lap and looked straight into her eyes. Without breaking her lock on the child's gaze, Alice sensed they'd stepped into nowhere. She could feel the fissures rending the world around her. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a crack in the sky and the presence of chaos. But she kept her attention fixed on the child and held the child's attention fixed to herself even as she rose to her feet, for the child weighed not much more than an average bag of groceries.

Alice stepped back into the world she had come from, the world seventy-two years into the child's own future. "Mommy?" the child said. "Daddy?" The high, piping voice sounded thinner than it had when the child had been explaining the world she had been making in the sandbox—thinner, almost threadbare. Old Alice noticed that in her world, the child weighed nothing at all, less even than the weight of a light cotton dress, less than the weight of the barrettes holding the unruly russet hair out of the child's eyes. Less, certainly, than the weight of the child when Alice had taken her from her world.

Although the child weighed nothing, and her voice could be heard only inside Old Alice's head, Old Alice herself felt strangely heavier than her bones could now seem to bear. The weight pulled at her legs, forcing her to her knees on the walkway of a condo complex she had no memory of having entered. The weight pulled at her heart, clutching it with claws of cold iron. And the weight pulled at her head, compressing her brain with a force that filled her eyes with a red haze and her ears with gray thunder. The weight was altogether more than she could ever manage to live with.

The man who found Alice just yards from his front door briefly glimpsed the shadow of a child on the sidewalk beside her. Voiceless, with only enough body to cast the slightest and thinnest of shadows, that one small fragment of young Alice's being wandered the future like a shade cast into Hades for the few minutes her specter had the energy to sustain.

And then it was gone. ○

BITTERSEED

Ted Kosmatka

Ted Kosmatka hails from the cornfields and steel mills of Indiana. He's been a field hand, a college tutor, a zoo-keeper, a chemical analyst, an eco-researcher, and a laborer in the red-black guts of a blast furnace. He now works for a research laboratory. Ted's knowledge of those cornfields comes in handy in his second story for *Asimov's*.

The world was rivets.

Marc groaned as he lifted his face from the cold, steel deck and tried to focus his eyes. Pain thundered in his skull, driving away articulate thought. He knew he had to hurry but couldn't remember why. So much blood, red on gray—a wet smear across the smooth metallic surface.

He rolled onto his back and brought a hand to the side of his face where he found the familiar topography transformed into something loose and lumpy—something with two sharp angles where none had been before. He tried to move his mouth and the bones grated; his jaw was broken.

The field-skim thrummed beneath him, waking new pain along his left leg as the ship adjusted its flight course. He tried to sit but his ribs flared white-hot, and he collapsed, breathing hard up at the blue sky.

Movement caught his eye and he concentrated the blurry figure into focus. Eli's sun-creased face glared down over the railing of the sight deck twenty feet above. There was no mistaking his expression. Marc blinked and the face was gone.

He remembered then why he had to hurry. And he remembered why he'd jumped.

Ignoring the pain, he hauled himself to his knees and then to his feet. The deck heaved beneath him as the skim banked hard to port on its pre-programmed flight pattern across the crop glade. He clutched weakly at the railing for balance, trying not to faint while sparks played across his vision. The field-skim was one of the corporation's smaller ships—just under thirty meters—and was designed to fly close to the crop surface. Beyond the railing, the spindly green tops of maiza whisked by a few meters below.

On this planet, maiza was the equatorial crop, and from Marc's perspective, it spread in a swaying carpet from the eastern horizon to the low mountains sixty kilometers to the west. It wasn't just a sea of green; it was a vast, sweeping ocean. The individual plants were tall and thin, and

the backwash of air from the skim made the stalks dance as they flashed by below.

Marc glanced around for a weapon, but the nose deck was empty. There was only the hard steel floor, the railing, wind, and a sea of green all around. Oh, and the ladder. Mustn't forget the ladder.

Eli descended toward him a rung at a time.

Marc felt the vibration when the man's boots slapped heavily to the ship's lowest deck. Though Eli stood three inches shorter than Marc, he outweighed him by fifty hard-won pounds of muscle. There were no guns on Tristan-3, but Man's indomitable spirit never lacked for improvisation: Eli still carried the iron tamping rod that had broken Marc's jaw.

Marc backed against the rail. Eli followed with his dark eyes but did not move. The wind lifted his short, black hair off his forehead in buffet-spikes.

"There's still time to take it back," Marc said.

"I don't want to take it back," Eli said.

"Are you sure?" That was as close to begging as Marc would go.

"Very."

Marc ducked the first swing and rolled across the deck. His head swam with the sudden movement, and colors blotted his vision again as he reached up for the railing. The swing had been just high enough to let him slip beneath. Eli was toying with him. Marc pulled himself to his feet, backing toward the far front of the skim.

Eli followed, changing his grip on the long iron cylinder and widening his stance. The second swing was calculated to be more damaging, and Marc sacrificed an arm to save his skull. The bar careened off his forearm with a crunch of bone, missing the top of his head by an inch.

Marc staggered back against the railing, clutching his arm. He turned and Eli was two steps away, poised, a smile on his face. Marc saw it in his eyes then. He saw it in the smile. This wouldn't be a beating. Eli was going to kill him.

Marc considered rushing him, but then what? He wouldn't have a chance. Instead Marc looked him in the eye. "Don't get caught for this," he said. "It would kill Mom to lose both of us."

"I've already thought of that."

Eli raised the iron rod. Marc slid backward over the handrail just ahead of his brother's final blow. His feet followed him into the spinning sky, and then the wind tore at his clothes and the stalks were crunching like bones breaking. Silence.

Marc opened his eyes to darkness. Pain and the sweet smell of growing things told him he was not dead. For a long time he just breathed, and that was miracle enough—to ask for more seemed presumptuous. The fall should have killed him and he knew it.

Wind blew high up through the stalks, making rasping whispers of the shadows that moved there. It was a sound he'd grown familiar with in his four years on Tristan-3, and it brought him a strange species of comfort.

When he tried to sit, pain quaked through him, too diffuse and all encompassing to isolate in any single body part. Everywhere hurt. Slowly,

by degrees, he managed to roll out of the crater he'd made in the soft black dirt. The fall had embedded him well into the moist soil, and he left a perfect imprint of himself behind. He rolled against the row of maiza and let himself feel the hard vertical shafts against his back and legs. He raised himself up on an elbow.

One of the moons was rising, and Marc caught glimpses of it through the swaying leaves. It looked like Bromb, the larger moon, but he couldn't be sure. He thought of his brother and knew he couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

His good arm climbed the stalk, and he pulled himself to his feet. He leaned against the plant, feeling the slow sway. Even with all that had happened, he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at the touch. This year's maiza crop was the healthiest yet. As a geneticist for Pioneer Seed Co. he'd worked long and hard toward that goal. It was likely now to be his only legacy.

Down the row to his left, he saw the leaning, shattered shafts that had slowed his descent and saved his life. The plants lay skewed across the narrow gap between the rows, their leaves crumpled beneath the weight of the stalks. To the right, the row disappeared into the distance. What direction had the skim been going when he jumped? East? North? He couldn't remember.

He put his shoulder against one of the plants and pushed with all his weight, but it was already too late in the season. He wasn't strong enough to bring one down. He counted the broken stalks: four. Would that be enough for them to find him—four broken stalks among a continent of maiza? Perhaps, but Eli would direct the search parties away from any evidence. He would say that Marc fell near the river thirty kilometers to the East, or at the edge of the mountains. The satellites might be able to pick out four broken stalks in the vast sea of green, but Eli wouldn't have them looking for that.

Marc felt the energy drain out of his legs as he considered his situation. There would be no rescue. His knees folded, and he collapsed to the dirt, sending a fresh jolt of pain through his jaw. Mother would take this hard. By now Eli would have told her. A fresh rush of anger welled up in him. She was too old to deal with this; she'd lost so much already.

When he laid his face on the warm ground, the soil was as soft as any pillow. He breathed in the smells of life and slipped into the darkness.

He woke to roaring sunshine. An early morning wind drove the leaves into a kind of applause as he sat and wiped the crusted dirt from the side of his face. Something in his broken jaw shifted, and he screamed. His mouth was cotton dry, his tongue coated in grit.

As he sat, he considered his options. He could sit here and die, or he could walk and probably still die. He looked down at the little crater he'd made and decided it looked too much like a grave.

Marc stood. Looking up at the sun through the long, narrow leaves, he decided which way was north and set off down the row to the right, pushing aside the leaves as he walked.

Maiza was an amazing plant. The roots of its cultivation could be

traced back a thousand years on Earth to aboriginal Central American populations. Later, in the twentieth century, it became a staple throughout the world for both animal feed and human consumption. But the leafy green field he walked through now hardly resembled what twentieth century farmers would call corn. Agricultural geneticists had stopped using that term more than a hundred years ago.

Maiza now clung to the equatorial continent of Tristan-3 in an ecological monoculture, dominating the landscape to the complete exclusion of endemic flora. The local plants simply couldn't compete with a thousand years of selective breeding. It was midseason now, and the plants were already fifteen feet tall. Upon harvesting, each would produce a variety of usable products for export to fringe colonies. The stalks were mulched into a biodegradable lubricating oil; the cobs provided food for people and livestock; and the leathery leaf fiber was used to make heavy, durable rope.

The enormous continental basin was divided into a corrugated pattern of male and female plants: two female rows for every male. The sexes were of different strains, designed to be of slightly differing heights so that the male reproductive tassels were close to the female cobs. This helped diminish the instances of self-fertilization, and subsequent inbreeding depression in seed product.

Marc trudged on, and when the sun was middle high, he stopped and turned. The world behind him was indistinguishable from the one before him. The air moved not at all, and the light lent a soft green cast to everything beneath the leafy canopy. He took his shirt off and continued walking.

In the early evening, the rain began. It fell as a gentle haze that clung to everything, soaking his clothes and turning the soil to glop. It rained most days on the central continent, but the rain was always like this: weak and misty. Marc tried to lick the droplets of moisture off the leaves and stalks, and although his tongue got wet, there was little he could actually swallow. He continued walking and after another hour the rain stopped. The sun set behind a bank of clouds, and darkness fell quickly beneath the leaves.

He lost energy as the moons rose, and when he could walk no more, he slept where he fell.

In the morning the leaves were dry again, and his legs were stiff and sore as he climbed to his feet. During the night his thirst had grown into something burning in the middle of him. How long could a man live without water? Three days? Four?

He started walking again, and now he felt each leaf as pain on his exposed skin. Both arms were swollen and red from the microscopic nettles on the surface of the leaves. After all these years of working with the plant, he'd thought himself intimate with it, but this was something he'd never dealt with before. You don't feel the nettles if you're only in the fields for a few hours.

When the rains came again, Marc threw himself into the task of hydration. He licked the surface of the plants again, running his tongue up and down the leaves, trying to get enough moisture to swallow. He opened his mouth to the sky and kicked at the base of the stalks to shake droplets loose. He worked vigorously for more than an hour, losing his

shoe to the muck. He went from plant to plant until his tongue swelled, and his lips split.

When the rain stopped, his thirst seemed stronger than before.

Because there was nothing else to do, he continued walking. When night fell, he slept.

The field applauded him again. He looked up into the green-tinted light and licked his chapped lips. Golden patterns of sun played across the dark soil—such good soil, the geologists had said. Perfect for growing things. It had taken the company a long time to find a place like Tristan-3.

There were discrepancies, of course. There would always be discrepancies. After all, you couldn't just transplant life from one planet to another and expect it to thrive immediately. There were little problems that had to be dealt with first, little things that had to be fixed.

That first year, the crop had been stunted and pathetic. Too little nitrogen in the soil, too much sodium chloride. Even the sunlight was slightly wrong—bright enough, but skewed into a slightly higher spectrum than earthly chloroplasts were evolved for. They could photosynthesize, but at a diminished efficiency. That's why Pioneer needed Marc. It was always so much simpler to change the plant than to change the planet.

A year later, Marc pulled some strings and had his brother brought to the outpost colony as his assistant. Marc, Eli, and their mother—one big happy family again.

The second year's crop showed a 40 percent yield increase. Not great, but definitely a step in the right direction.

It was during the winter before the third growing season that Marc made the breakthrough. That third year, the company finally turned a profit on its investment.

Marc pulled himself from the dirt. Hunger swept through him. Was Eli eating a big hearty breakfast? Was he taking a shower and letting all that precious, precious water cascade over his skin and down a drain? Was he looking into a mirror and thinking of what he'd done? Marc knew his brother well. He knew Eli told himself that his motives had been purely financial. Maybe Eli even believed it—there *was* a lot of money in agri patents. But Marc knew better. Money had nothing to do with it.

Marc looked up at the husks just out of reach overhead. He grabbed a plant and shook it in frustration, but the husks were hugged tightly into their leafy blankets against the stalks, and he knew he'd never shake them down.

After a moment's thought, he un-cinched his belt and flipped it into a loop. He bent his knees, eyed the spot carefully, and jumped into the air, hooking the belt around the top of the husk. He pulled. It came down with a crackle and landed at his feet.

At first he almost couldn't believe it had worked so easily. Then he bent and snatched the leafy coverings aside and pulled away the yellow, straw-like filaments. The cob beneath was white and pebbly, and his stomach growled in anticipation as he ran a finger slowly across the hard kernels.

He raised it to his mouth and bit—and something unhinged in his jaw.

Marc screamed in pain, and then the pain turned to rage, and he threw the cob as far as he could. Tears sprang to his eyes, and though he tried, he could not hold them back. He collapsed into the mud, holding a hand to the side of his broken face, and he wept bitterly up at the swaying plants that would feed millions.

Though Marc and Eli were born four months apart, they were identical twins. At least in theory. Circumstance had stepped in and changed all that. The same accident that killed their father began the process that would so starkly divide them.

The Pagas mine colony was in shambles, and it took nearly an hour for help to burrow through. By that time, their mother's pre-term labor had progressed too far, and Eli was born unfinished onto a bloody miner's jacket amongst the rubble. The doctors managed to halt the labor, and Marc was saved from his brother's fate. The doctors didn't expect Eli to live, but after the pneumonias and the seizures, after the surgeries and the transfusions, he did.

Months later, when Marc, the second twin, was finally laid next to the first, he was twice the size of Eli. But the differences went deeper than that.

Although Eli had come first into the world, it was Marc who crawled first, Marc who said the first word, Marc who first learned to pee into the toilet standing up.

As the babies grew into children, Eli developed severe asthma and couldn't play rough with the other boys from the work zones. There was always a sense of difference about him—made only more starkly visible by the presence of a brother to whom he bore such a striking resemblance. To anyone with eyes, Eli was Marc, only less.

And Marc never let him forget it.

Perhaps it was guilt that drove the taunting. Marc looked at Eli as what he easily could have been had chance only positioned his body nearer to the mouth of his mother's womb. Eli was a constant reminder of the gift he'd been given, the debt he owed fate. Marc grew to resent his brother almost as much as Eli grew silently to hate him.

Once, when their mother caught Marc bullying, she jerked him into another room by his arm, leaving great red welts on his bicep.

"Do you know what you're doing?" she asked him. He only looked up at her mutely, shaken by her sudden, unexpected rage.

"Why do you do these things to him?" she asked.

"I don't know," Marc said.

"You reap what you sow," she said. "If you keep this up, it's going to be a bitter harvest."

He hadn't understood what that meant.

He understood now.

Marc stopped sobbing and picked himself up from the dirt. He picked his way between the shafts to where he'd thrown the cob. He picked it up and turned it slowly in his hand. He brushed off the clinging chunks of mud. Opening his mouth, he carefully placed the cob against his upper teeth and pressed. His incisors sank into the hard flesh, and when he turned the cob, a scatter of kernels popped free onto his tongue. He swal-

lowed them down greedily without chewing. When the cob was bare, he used his belt to pull down another and repeated the process.

He didn't walk anymore that day, and when night fell, he lay in the mud and slept with a full belly.

The cramps came around midday. When he looked down at his stool, his heart sank. He'd known something was wrong. Instead of getting stronger after yesterday's meal, his strength had continued to ebb.

The corn lay in a mushy pile where he'd squatted. For all the hours it had run through his digestive tract, it had hardly changed at all. The kernels were perfect.

It probably cost more energy to move through his gut than the meal had provided.

He sat and leaned back against a stalk, shutting his eyes. The wind made shuffling noises overhead, and this time, it wasn't applause he heard; it was laughter.

He was hot. He ran a hand across his forehead, and his brow was strangely dry. Even his tongue was dry. His lips were cracked. If he didn't get water today, he would die tomorrow.

He thought of standing and walking again but couldn't make himself do it. Instead, he took his clothes off and laid them flat across the ground. Then he looked up at the sky and willed it to rain.

An hour later it did.

His clothes dampened slowly in the drizzle, and when they were finally wet enough, he wrung the moisture into his mouth. It came slow but steady—a trickle really—but he let the water fill his mouth completely before swallowing. It burned like ice going down his ragged throat, but it was the best water he'd ever tasted. He swallowed again and again. By the time the rain had stopped, his stomach was cramping with moisture. He mopped the clothes up and down the maiza plants, gathering extra water. Then he carefully wadded up the shirt and pants and continued walking.

As night neared, he stopped, un-balled the wet fabric, and wrung out every ounce of liquid into his mouth. Afterward, he slept.

It rained on the next three days and Marc drank himself full. He gradually came to realize that he wouldn't die of thirst, but food was an altogether different problem. When the hunger became too much to bear, he would hook down a cob and fill his belly with the worthless kernels. It took the edge off his aching emptiness, but it did little to sustain him. The kernels left him in the same condition they entered.

Marc had never been fat, even as a child. But as he'd approached early middle age, a certain thickening had developed around his mid-section that he was never able to fully eliminate. He couldn't find the extra hours in the day to work out, and he lacked the motivation to push away second helpings at the dinner table. His mother had laughed when he'd complained about it one afternoon at the family meal. She patted him lovingly on the little gut that puffed above his belt line and said, "It's a sign of health."

"It's a sign of too many of your pasta dinners," he'd said.

That gut was gone now.

Eli had spent many hours in the gym turning that same soft thickening into something hard and strong. Eli didn't have his brother's length of bone, and it was as if he could make up for it in muscle. Marc had seen the hypodermic needles in the trash, but he'd never said a word.

Marc no longer felt the scrape of the leaves on his bare flesh as he walked. His nerves had either gone dead beneath the bands of red welts, or his skin was callused to the nettles. He couldn't bring himself to care which.

It was on the morning of his eighth day among the stalks that Marc found the grub. It revealed itself in a slight yellowing of leaves. Marc stopped and considered the miasma plant carefully. He blinked, looked again, and the plant was still a slightly different shade than its neighbors. The scientific part of his mind ran through the list of possibilities: mutation, disease, parasite. He noticed the hole then. It was small, slightly larger than his finger, and it descended into the soil at the base of the yellowing plant. A root parasite?

Marc fell to his knees and dug. The grub pulled free from the soil in a writhing mass of ciliated legs. It was pale and mushy, approximately the circumference of his wrist, and about half a foot long. Marc didn't hesitate, didn't pretend there was a choice to make. Despite the pain in his jaw, he bit into the thing where he thought the head might be and swallowed down an oily chunk of flesh. It tasted like vinegar, but he bit again. The thing never stopped moving as he ate. He wondered if it *still* moved in his stomach.

He meant to save some for later, but his hunger prevented it. When the last of the animal was down his throat, he ran his slimy hands through the dirt to clean them off. Then he stood and continued on, waiting to die of poisoning, or not.

By nightfall he felt a measure of his strength returning and knew his body had been able to break down at least some of the alien compounds. The native fauna had most of the same amino acids as terrestrial organisms, but those small differences had been known to be fatal on other worlds. The rule of thumb was this: don't eat anything native. Considering his options, Marc thought it was time to suspend the rules.

The days blurred into one another. He drank when it rained; he ate every few days when he came across a yellowing maize plant. The grubs grew larger as the season progressed, and the canopy of leaves grew thicker and higher, eventually closing off the rest of the world until Marc could see only a half-dozen feet in any direction.

Some nights he dreamed of harvest and giant steel machines. Some nights he woke screaming.

The labor camps weren't the kind of places you raised children if you had any other choice, and Marc's mother worked hard to keep her boys alive from month to month. Twelve-hour shifts, six days a week, kept them in the kind of poverty that was only just this side of starvation. The system was different then, less kind. A lot of people died inside their equipment rigs, and a father's absence wasn't such a rare thing among the throng of children that crowded the edge of industrial zones. The companies moved them from one outpost to the next, providing the living quarters and a small stipend—but the paychecks always went back to the company for food.

Family was all-important to his mother. What else did they have? She never brought another man home in front of her children like many lonely women. She made her boys her world and her cause. Marc and Eli saw how hard their mother worked, and sometimes when they lay in bed together at night, they talked of how they would save her. They whispered of the life that they would give her, where she'd never want for anything, where she would have peace.

It wasn't until Sepselan-16 that Marc and Eli were introduced to formal education. Marc's natural aptitude earned him entry into the special program, and, afterward, his mother was transferred into housekeeping. They didn't pretend the two events weren't connected. Even Eli was given special educational dispensation—they began training him as a cook. Later, Pioneer Seed Co. picked Marc up as apprentice geneticist, and the family was transferred to an agricultural colony. Although Eli's scores didn't merit it, Marc was able to get him enrolled in a tech program.

When Marc was given his first assignment, he gave the tickets to his mother on her birthday and asked her to quit her job and follow him to Maldron for the five-month term. When she hugged him tightly, tears of pride brimming in her eyes, he'd caught a glimpse of his brother's face from over her shoulder, and a quiet kind of panic settled into the base of his spine.

Looking back, he'd known then. The bitter harvest was coming.

Marc counted his footsteps as he trudged through the green. At the end of the day, he calculated the distance of each step and ascertained that in more than two months he'd walked a little less than a hundred kilometers. Not quite halfway back to the colony. He looked up at the ripe cobs and knew he wouldn't make it. The season was over. Harvest was upon him.

That night a sound woke him from his sleep. It was the sound from his nightmares, and for a while he lay in the dirt unsure whether he was really awake or not. But the metallic grinding grew louder and he knew the big machines had come. He jerked to his feet, heart pounding in his chest. *Which way was it coming from?* The closed space around him confused the sound, spreading it evenly through the stalks. He held his breath, concentrating, and then, suddenly, he knew. He sprinted blindly down the row away from the sound, tearing at the leaves as he ran. The combines had no lights; they didn't need them. The enormous machines were navigated by satellite guidance as they moved quickly over the flat terrain of the continental basin.

The sound was nearly deafening now. He stopped. Did he expect to outrun them?

He dropped to his knees and tore at the moist soil with his hands. He dug feverishly, scooping out chunks of dirt. Behind him the din continued louder, closer. He put his back into the work, using both hands together. The trench gradually widened, deepened. Now the noise was a roar banging against the stalks, and when he chanced a backward glance, the combine towered into view above him. He threw himself into the trench face-first, imbedding his hands deeply into the soil for purchase. The noise became something bigger than he was, and then a great wind tore at his

bare flesh, threatening to lift him from the dirt while a thousand tiny net-
tles scoured his backside. He screamed into the blackness and the sound
was torn away, lost in the tumult.

Silence.

He raised his head and stars blinked down across an open expanse of
land. He could see the hulking, metallic shape moving into the distance,
leaving a mile-wide swath of stubbled dirt behind it. The vastness around
him was disorienting after his long mobile confinement within a visual
space of a few meters.

He stood and felt likely to fall sideways into the sky. Only the dirt and
six inches of stalk remained of the world he had spent every moment of
the last two months in. His clothes were gone. He was naked and empty-
handed.

A breath of wind caressed his flesh and he shivered. He walked and
that felt familiar.

In the morning he learned of a new enemy. The sun climbed onto his
back and stomped hard with both feet, pushing him into the hot dirt. His
skin had gone pale beneath the leaves, and now it burned and blistered
in the glare. When the rains came at midday, he lay on the ground and
covered himself with mud, so that he was afforded some protection when
sun renewed its assault in the afternoon. He walked on.

When night fell, he shivered in the wind and got a few hours' sleep. At
dawn he continued.

They would never find his body, and that was pleasing to him. His
mother would have no grave to fret over. And she would have Eli there to
remind her of what he'd been like as a living being. Perhaps she would
weather this—or, actually, had weathered it already. After all, she'd prob-
ably thought him dead for two months now.

When the rain came again, it washed some of the mud loose from his
body, but he dared not stop to renew his supply. Something deep inside
whispered that if he stopped walking, even for an instant, he would never
start again. Night fell, and he walked on.

At some point, he became aware of lights. In the distance at first, but
nearing slowly from his left. And then the lights were on him and he was
blinking up into brilliance. He let himself sit then, and hung his head to
his chest. The field-skim landed nearby, and in the next instant arms
were lifting him to his feet.

"Marc, is that really you?" a man asked.

The face belonged to John Miller, a close friend in another lifetime.

Marc only nodded and let the arms drag him to the skim.

"My mother?" His words were slow and canted; the jaw didn't want to
move right.

"Not good," his old friend answered. "She still thinks you're alive. Well,
you *are* alive, but she was the only one who . . . Marc, what the hell hap-
pened?"

Marc lifted his head from the pilot's cot and took another sip of water.
At this speed, skims tended to ride rough, and he had to be careful not to
spill. "Why not good?"

"I try to stop by and visit her when I can, but it's hard to see her this way. Her health hasn't been good lately."

"And Eli?"

"He's in charge of the seed program now. Your mother won't let him out of sight, follows him around everywhere because she's so afraid of losing another son. Marc, there were a lot of people who never bought Eli's story about what happened. A company prosecutor was brought in to investigate."

"All the way out here?"

"A possible death-penalty case, Marc. Fratricide."

"What did he find?"

"Same as us, fishy as hell but no proof. What happened?"

Marc rolled over in the cot and put his face to the wall. He felt a hand on his shoulder for a moment, then the hand was gone. He slipped into unconsciousness.

Marc woke as the field-skim settled into dock. He rose to his feet and stepped into the bathroom. He didn't recognize the bearded, crook-jawed man staring back at him from the mirror. He urinated and washed his hands. John was waiting outside the door.

"I thought you—

Marc held up his hand. "Hurts to talk, so don't make me. Who knows about me?"

"Everybody. I radioed it in. The special investigator wants to talk to you."

"He's still here?" *Would Mother really be relieved to gain one son and lose the other?* "I need a minute to clear my head."

The latch opened from the outside.

"Doesn't look like you're going to get it, Marc."

A tall man in a company suit walked through the door. "Welcome back from the dead," he said, extending a hand. "I'm Special Investigator Tom Brennen. We've got a lot to talk about."

"Do we?" Mark asked.

Twenty minutes later, Marc walked down the hall to his old office. He paused at the door. He pushed it open. He stepped inside.

Matching dark eyes moved to his.

"Brother," Marc said, and then he shut the door.

Eli didn't move. He sat stiffly behind the desk. His face looked different. Older. He'd lost weight. The last few months had taken a toll on him, too.

Eli opened the desk drawer and stuck his hand inside. "I've been waiting for you," he said. He pulled out a white envelope and tossed it on the desk.

"What is it?"

"Some days a confession. Others, a suicide note."

"Which is it today?" Marc picked the envelope off the desk.

"Today? I don't know, brother. The day isn't over yet."

Marc looked down at the envelope in his hands but didn't open it.

From out in the hall he heard a shout. A woman's shout of joy, his mother screaming his name. His mother was coming down the hall.

Marc looked at his brother, ripped the envelope in half, and tossed it in the trash. ○

SCIENCE FICTION SUDOKU CONTEST RESULTS

Our March 2006 issue of *Asimov's* featured our first Science Fiction Sudoku puzzles and an accompanying contest. The response was overwhelmingly positive. My thanks to everyone who entered the contest as well as to all those who sent in letters about the puzzles. I appreciated all the suggestions and comments. The huge response most certainly justifies a regular Sudoku feature. As promised, I'll be sure to fit it in around the fiction, so the feature may not show up in every issue.

Choosing the winners from so many wonderful entries was difficult indeed. First place goes to two men who came up with the same fiendish idea. Both Dominic J. Vitacco and Lyle Wiedeman received autographed copies of Allen M. Steele's *Coyote Frontier* for their award-winning entries. The puzzle appears below. Please turn to page 101 for the rest of our winners.

This SF Sudoku puzzle is solved using the letters AEHILNRST. Place a letter into each box so that each row across, each column down, and each small nine-box square within the larger diagram (there are nine of these) will contain each of these letters. No letter will appear more than once in any row, column, or smaller nine-box square. The solution is determined through logic and the process of elimination. Beneath the puzzle is a set of twenty blanks. Rearrange the following letters for a famous SF title: A,A,E,E,E,H,I,L,L,N,R,S,S,S,S,T,T,T, and T. The answers for the Sudoku puzzle and the anagram can be found beneath our classified ads on page 143. The solution to each puzzle is independent of the other. I've inverted the answer to the anagram so that you don't come upon it by accident.

	L		R			N		
	H	N		A				
T					H		A	R
	T	H		E	R			A
A		R		N		T		S
I			H	T		R	L	
H	A		E					L
				L		H	E	
		L			T		R	

Tim Pratt's stories have been published in *Best American Short Stories*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and other places. His first novel, *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl* (Bantam Spectra), appeared in 2005, and his next collection, *Hart & Boot & Other Stories*, will be out later this year from Nightshade Books. Tim co-edits a little literary 'zine called *Flytrap* with his wife, Heather Shaw. They live in Oakland, California. In his new story for *Asimov's*, he takes a fresh look at that mysterious little shop we'd all like to find once again, and offers us a tantalizing glimpse of some . . .

IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS

Tim Pratt

Pete was walking home from the revival movie house, where he'd caught an evening showing of *To Have and Have Not*, when he first saw the video store.

He stopped on the sidewalk, head cocked, frowning at the narrow store squeezed between a kitschy gift shop and a bakery. He stepped toward the door, peered inside, and saw old movie posters on the walls, racks of DVDs and VHS tapes, and a big screen TV against one wall. The lettering on the door read "Impossible Dreams Video," and the smudges on the glass suggested it had been in business for a while.

Except it *hadn't* been. Pete knew every video store in the county, from the big chains to the tiny place staffed by film students up by the University to the little porno shop downtown that sometimes sold classic Italian horror flicks and bootleg Asian movies. He'd never even heard of this place, and he walked this way at least twice a week. Pete believed in movies like other people believed in God, and he couldn't understand how he'd overlooked a store just three blocks from his own apartment. He pushed open the door, and a bell rang. The shop was small, just three aisles of DVDs and a wall of VHS tapes, fluorescent lights and ancient blue industrial carpet, and there were no customers. The clerk said "Let me know if you need any help," and he nodded, barely noticing her beyond the fact that she was female, somewhere south of thirty, and had short pale hair that stuck up like the fluff on a baby chick.

Pete headed toward the classics section. He was a cinematic omnivore,

but you could judge a video store by the quality of its classics shelf the same way you could judge a civilization by the state of its prisons. He looked along the row of familiar titles—and stopped at a DVD turned face-out, with a foil “New Release” sticker on the front.

Pete picked it up with trembling hands. The box purported to be the director's cut of *The Magnificent Ambersons* by Orson Welles.

“Is this a joke?” he said, holding up the box, almost angry.

“What?” the clerk said.

He approached her, brandishing the box, and he could tell by her arched eyebrows and guarded posture that she thought he was going to be a problem. “Sorry,” he said. “This says it's the director's cut of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, with the missing footage restored.”

“Yeah,” she said, brightening. “That came out a few weeks ago. You didn't know? Before, you could only get the original theatrical version, the one the studio butchered—”

“But the missing footage,” he interrupted, “it was lost, destroyed, and the only record of the last fifty minutes was the continuity notes from the production.”

She frowned. “Well, yeah, the footage *was* lost, and everyone assumed it was destroyed, but they found the film last year in the back corner of some warehouse.”

How had this news passed Pete by? The forums he visited online should have been *buzzing* with this information, a film buff's wet dream. “How did they find the footage?”

“It's an interesting story, actually. Welles talks about it on the commentary track. I mean, it's a little scattered, but the guy's in his nineties, what do you expect? He—”

“You're mistaken,” Pete said. “Unless Welles is speaking from beyond the grave. He died in the 1980s.”

She opened her mouth, closed it, then smiled falsely. Pete could practically hear her repeating mental customer service mantras: the customer is always right, even when he's wrong. “Sure, whatever you say. Do you want to rent the DVD?”

“Yeah,” he said. “But I don't have an account here.”

“You local? We just need a phone number and ID, and some proof of address.”

“I think I've got my last pay stub,” Pete said, rooting through his wallet and passing over his papers. She gave him a form to fill out, then typed his information into her computer. While she worked he said, “Look, I don't mean to be a jerk, it's just—I'd *know*. I know a lot about movies.”

“You don't have to believe me,” she said, tapping the DVD case with her finger. “Total's \$3.18.”

He took out his wallet again, but though it bulged with unsorted receipts and scraps of paper with notes to himself, there was no cash. “Take a credit card?”

She grimaced. “There's a five buck minimum on credit card purchases, sorry—house rules.”

“I'll get a couple of other movies,” he said.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost 10:00.

“I know you're about to close, I'll hurry,” he said.

She shrugged. “Sure.”

He went to the Sci-Fi shelf—and had another shock. *I, Robot* was there, but *not* the forgettable action movie with Will Smith—this was older, and the credits said “written by Harlan Ellison.” But Ellison’s adaptation of the Isaac Asimov book had never been produced, though it *had* been published in book form. “Must be some bootleg student production,” he muttered, and he didn’t recognize the name of the production company. But—but—it said “winner of the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay.” That *had* to be a student director’s little joke, straight-facedly absurd box copy, as if this were a film from some alternate reality. Worth watching, certainly, though again, he couldn’t imagine how he’d never heard of this. Maybe it had been done by someone local. He took it to the counter and offered his credit card.

She looked at the card dubiously. “Visa? Sorry, we only take Weber and FosterCard.”

Pete stared at her, and took back the card she held out to him. “This is a major credit card,” he said, speaking slowly, as if to a child. “I’ve never even heard of—”

Shrugging, she looked at the clock again, more pointedly this time. “Sorry, I don’t make the rules.”

He *had* to see these movies. In matters of film—new film! strange film!—Pete had little patience, though in other areas of his life he was easygoing to a fault. But movies *mattered*. “Please, I live right around the corner, just let me go grab some cash and come back, ten minutes, please?”

Her lips were set in a hard line. He gestured at *The Magnificent Ambersons*. “I just want to see it, as it was meant to be seen. You’re into movies, right? *You* understand.”

Her expression softened. “Okay. Ten minutes, but that’s it. I want to get home, too.”

Pete thanked her profusely and all but ran out of the store. He *did* run when he got outside, three mostly uphill blocks to his apartment in a stucco duplex, fumbling the keys and cursing, finally getting into his sock drawer where he kept a slim roll of emergency cash. He raced back to Impossible Dreams, breathing so hard he could feel every exhalation burning through his body, a stitch of pain in his side. Pete hadn’t run, *really* run, since gym class in high school, a decade earlier.

He reached the bakery, and the gift shop, but there was no door to Impossible Dreams Video between them—there was no *between* at all. The stores stood side by side, without even an alleyway dividing them.

Pete put his hand against the brick wall. He tried to convince himself he was on the wrong block, that he’d gotten turned around while running, but he knew it wasn’t true. He walked back home, slowly, and when he got to his apartment, he went into his living room, with its floor-to-ceiling metal shelves of tapes and DVDs. He took a disc down and loaded it into his high-end, region-free player, then took his remote in hand and turned on the vast plasma flat-screen TV. The surround-sound speakers hummed to life, and Pete sank into the exquisitely contoured leather chair in the center of the room. Pete owned a rusty four-door Honda with two hundred thousand miles on the engine, he lived mostly on cheap macaroni-and-cheese, and he saved money on toilet paper by stealing rolls from the bathrooms in the University’s Admissions Office, where he

worked. He lived simply in almost every way, so that he could live extravagantly in the world of film.

He pressed play. Pete owned the entire *Twilight Zone* television series on DVD, and now the narrator's eminently reasonable voice spoke from the speakers, introducing the tale of a man who finds a dusty little magic shop, full of wonders.

As he watched, Pete began to nod his head, and whispered, "Yes."

Pete checked in the morning; he checked at lunch; he checked after leaving his job in the Admissions Office in the evening; but Impossible Dreams did not reappear. He grabbed dinner at a little sandwich shop, then paced up and down the few blocks at the far end of the commercial street near his apartment. At 8:30 he leaned against a light pole, and stared at the place where Impossible Dreams had been. He'd arrived at, what, 9:45 last night? But who knew if time had anything to do with the miraculous video store's manifestation? What if it had been a one-time only appearance?

Around 8:45, the door was suddenly there. Pete had blinked, that was all, but between blinkings, something had *happened*, and the store was present again.

Pete shivered, a strange exultation filling him, and he wondered if this was how people who witnessed miraculous healings or bleeding statues felt. He took a deep breath and went into the store.

The same clerk was there, and she glared at him. "I waited for you last night."

"I'm sorry," Pete said, trying not to stare at her. Did she know this was a shop of wonders? She certainly didn't *act* as though she did. He thought she was *of* the miracle, not outside it, and to her, a world with *The Magnificent Ambersons* complete and uncut was nothing special. "I couldn't find any cash at home, but I brought plenty tonight."

"I held the videos for you," she said. "You really should see the Welles, it'll change your whole opinion of his career."

"That's really nice of you. I'm going to browse a little, maybe pick up a few things."

"Take your time. It's been really slow tonight, even for a Tuesday."

Pete's curiosity about her—the proprietor (or at least clerk) of a magic shop!—warred with his desire to ransack the shelves. "You always work by yourself?"

"Mostly, except on weekends. There really should be two clerks here, but my boss is losing money like crazy, with people downloading movies online, getting DVDs by mail order, all that stuff." She shook her head.

Pete nodded. He got movies online and in the mail, too, but there was something to be said for the instant gratification of renting something from the store, without waiting for mail or download. "Sorry to hear that. This seems like a great store. Are you here every night?"

She leaned on the counter and sighed. "Lately, yeah. I'm working as much as I can, double shifts some days. I need the money. I can't even afford to eat lately, beyond like an apple at lunch time and noodles for dinner. My roommate bailed on me, and I've had to pay twice the usual rent

while I look for a new roommate, it sucks. I just—ah, sorry, I didn't mean to dump all over you."

"No, it's fine," Pete said. While she spoke, he was able to look straight at her openly, and he'd noticed that, in addition to being a purveyor of miracles, she was pretty, in a frayed-at-the-edges ex-punk sort of way. Not his type at all—except that she obviously loved movies.

"Browse on," she said, and opened a heavy textbook on the counter.

Pete didn't need any more encouragement than that. Last night he'd developed a theory, and everything he saw now supported it. He thought this store belonged to some parallel universe, a world much like his own, but with subtle changes, like different names for the major credit cards. But even small differences could lead to huge divergences when it came to movies. Every film depended on so many variables—a director's capricious enthusiasm, a studio's faith in a script, a big star's availability, which starlet a producer happened to be sleeping with—*any* of those factors could irrevocably alter the course of a film, and Hollywood history was littered with the corpses of films that *almost* got made. Here, in this world, some of them *were* made, and Pete would go without sleeping for a week, if necessary, to see as many as possible.

The shelves yielded miracle after miracle. Here was *The Death of Superman*, directed by Tim Burton, starring Nicolas Cage; in Pete's universe, Burton and Cage had both dropped the project early on. Here was *Total Recall*, but directed and written by David Cronenberg, not Paul Verhoeven. Here was *The Terminator*, but starring O.J. Simpson rather than Arnold Schwarzenegger—though Schwarzenegger was still in the film, as Kyle Reese. Here was *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but starring Tom Selleck instead of Harrison Ford—and there was no sign of any later *Indiana Jones* films, which was sad. Pete's hands were already full of DVDs, and he juggled them awkwardly while pulling more movies from the shelves. Here was *Casablanca* starring George Raft instead of Bogart, and maybe it had one of the alternate endings, too! Here a John Wayne World War II movie he'd never heard of, but the box copy said it was about the *ground invasion* of the Japanese islands, and called it a "riveting historical drama." A quick scan of the shelves revealed no sign of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, and those two things together suggested that in *this* world, the atomic bomb was never dropped on Japan. The implications of that were potentially vast . . . but Pete dismissed broader speculations from his mind as another film caught his eye. In this world, Kubrick had lived long enough to complete *Artificial Intelligence* on his own, and Pete *had* to see that, without Steven Spielberg's sentimental touch turning the movie into Pinocchio.

"You only get them for three days," the clerk said, amused, and Pete blinked at her, feeling like a man in a dream. "You going to have time to watch all those?"

"I'm having a little film festival," Pete said, and he was—he planned to call in sick to work and watch *all* these movies, and copy them, if he could; who knew what kind of bizarre copy protection technology existed in this world?

"Well, my boss won't want to rent twenty movies to a brand new member, you know? Could you maybe cut it down to four or five, to save me the hassle of dealing with him? You live near here, right? So you can always bring them back and rent more when you're done."

"Sure," Pete said. He didn't like it, but he was afraid she'd insist if he pushed her. He selected four movies—*The Magnificent Ambersons*, *The Death of Superman*, *I, Robot*, and *Casablanca*—and put the others away. Once he'd rented a few times, maybe she'd let him take ten or twenty movies at once. Pete would have to see how much sick time he had saved up. This was a good time to get a nasty flu and miss a couple of weeks of work.

The clerk scanned the boxes, tapped her keyboard, and told him the total, \$12.72. He handed over two fives, two ones, two quarters, a dime, two nickels, and a couple of pennies—he'd brought *lots* of cash this time.

The clerk looked at the money on the counter, then up at him with an expression caught between amusement and wariness. She tapped the bills. "I know you aren't a counterfeiter, because then you'd at least try to make the fake money look real. What is this, from a game or something? It's not foreign, because I recognize our presidents, except the guy on, what's this, a dime?"

Pete suppressed a groan. The *money* was different, he'd never even thought of that. He began to contemplate the logistics of armed robbery.

"Wait, you've got a couple of nickels mixed in with the fake money," she said, and pulled the two nickels aside. "So that's only \$12.62 you still owe me."

"I feel really dumb," Pete said. "Yeah, it's money from a game I was playing yesterday, I must have picked it up by mistake." He swept up his bills and coins.

"You're a weird guy, Pete. I hope you don't mind me saying."

Nodding dolefully, he pulled a fistful of change from his pockets. "I guess I am." He had a lot of nickels, which were real—or close enough—in this world, and he counted them out on the counter, \$3.35 worth, enough for one movie. He'd go to the bank tomorrow and change his cash for *sacks* of nickels, as much as he could carry, and he would rent all these movies, five cents at a time. Sure, he could just snatch all four movies and run now, but then he'd never be able to come *back*, and there were shelves upon shelves of movies he wanted to see here. For tonight, he'd settle for just *The Magnificent Ambersons*. "This one," he said, and she took his nickels, shaking her head in amusement. She passed him a translucent plastic case and pennies in change, odd little octagonal coins.

"I'll put these away, Mr. Nickels," she said, taking the other movies he'd brought to the counter. "Enjoy, and let me know what you think of it."

Pete mumbled some pleasantries as he hurried out the door, disc clutched tight to his chest, and he alternated walking and running back to his apartment. Once inside, he turned on his humming stack of A/V components and opened the tray on the DVD player. He popped open the plastic case and removed the disc—simple, black with the title in silver letters—and put it in the tray. The disc was a little smaller than DVDs in this world, but it seemed to fit okay. The disc spun, hummed, and the display on the DVD flashed a few times before going blank. The television screen read "No disc." Pete swore and tried loading the disc again, but it didn't work. He sat in his leather chair and held his head in his hands. Money wasn't the only thing that was different in that other world. DVD encryption was, too. Even his region-free player, which could play discs from all over the world, couldn't read this version of *The Magnificent Am-*

bersons. The videotapes would be similarly useless—he'd noticed they were different than the tapes he knew from this world, some format that didn't exist here, smaller than VHS, larger than Betamax.

But all was not lost. Pete went out the door, carrying *The Magnificent Ambersons* with him, since he couldn't bear to let it go. He raced back to Impossible Dreams. "Do you rent DVD players?" he gasped, out of breath. "Mine's broken."

"We do, Pete," she said, "but there's a \$300 deposit. You planning to pay that in nickels?"

"Of course not," he said. "I got some real money from home. Can I see the player?" To hell with being reasonable. He'd snatch the player and run. She had his address, but this wasn't *her* world, and in a few more minutes the shop would disappear again. He could come back tomorrow night with a toy gun and steal all the DVDs he could carry, he would bring a *suitcase* to load them all in, he'd—

She set the DVD player on the counter with the cord curled on top. The electrical plug's two posts were oddly angled, one perpendicular to the other, and Pete remembered that electrical standards weren't even the same in *Europe* as they were in North America, so it was ridiculous to assume his own outlets would be compatible with devices from another universe. He rather doubted he'd be able to find an adapter at the local Radio Shack, and even if he could rig something, the amount of voltage carried in his wires at home could be all wrong, and he might destroy the DVD player, the way some American computers got fried if you plugged them into a European power outlet.

"Never mind," he said, defeated. He made a desultory show of patting his pockets and said, "I forgot my wallet."

"You okay, Pete?" she asked.

"Sure, I was just really excited about seeing it." He expected some contemptuous reply, something like "It's just a movie," the sort of thing he'd been hearing from friends and relatives his entire life.

Instead she said, "Hey, I get that. Don't worry, we'll have it in stock when you get your player fixed. Old Orson isn't such a hot seller anymore."

"Sure," Pete said. He pushed the DVD back across the counter at her.

"Want a refund? You only had it for twenty minutes."

"Keep it," Pete said. He hung around outside and watched from across the street as the clerk locked up. About ten minutes past 10:00, he blinked, and the store disappeared in the moment his eyes were closed. He trudged away.

That night, at home, he watched his own DVD of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, with its butchered continuity, its studio-mandated happy ending, tacked-on so as not to depress wartime audiences, and afterward he couldn't sleep for wondering what might have been.

Pete didn't think Impossible Dreams was going to reappear, and it was 9:00 before it did. He wondered if the window was closing, if the store would appear later and later each night until it never reappeared at all, gone forever in a week or a day. Pete pushed open the door, a heavy plastic bag in his hand. The clerk leaned on the counter, eating crackers from little plastic packages, the kind that came with soup in a restaurant. "Hi."

"Mr. Nickels," she said. "You're the only customer I get after 9:00 lately."

"You, ah, said you didn't have money for dinner lately, and I wanted to apologize for being so much trouble and everything . . . anyway, I brought some food, if you want some." He'd debated all day about what to bring. Fast food was out—what if her world didn't *have* McDonald's, what would she make of the packaging? He worried about other things, too—should he avoid beef, in case mad cow disease was rampant in her world? What if bird flu had made chicken into a rare delicacy? What if her culture was exclusively vegetarian? He'd finally settled on vegetarian egg rolls and rice noodles and hot and sour soup. He'd seen Hong Kong action movies in the store, so he knew Chinese culture still existed in her world, at least, and it was a safe bet that the food would be mostly the same.

"You are a *god*, Pete," she said, opening a paper container of noodles and wielding her chopsticks like a pro. "You know what I had for lunch today? A *pear*, and I had to steal it off my neighbor's tree. I got the crackers off a tray in the dining hall. You saved my life."

"Don't mention it. I'm really sorry I was so annoying the last couple of nights."

She waved her hand dismissively, mouth crammed with egg roll, and in her presence, Pete realized his new plan was impossible. He'd hoped to endear himself to her, and convince her to let him hang around until after closing, so he could . . . *stow away*, and travel to her world, where he could see *all* the movies, and maybe become the clerk's new roommate. It had all made sense at 3:00 in the morning the night before, and he'd spent most of the day thinking about nothing else, but now that he'd set his plan in motion he realized it was more theatrical than practical. It might work in a *movie*, but in life he didn't even know this woman's name, she wouldn't welcome him into her life, and even if she *did*, what would he do in her world? He spent all day processing applications, ordering transcripts, massaging a database, and filing things, but what would he do in her world? What if the computers there had totally different programming languages? What would he do for money, once his hypothetical giant sack of nickels ran out?

"I'm sorry, I never asked your name," he said.

"I'm Ally," she said. "Eat an egg roll, I feel like a pig."

Pete complied, and Ally came around the counter. "I've got something for you." She went to the big screen TV and switched it on. "We don't have time to watch the whole thing, but there's just enough time to see the last fifty minutes, the restored footage, before I have to close up." She turned on the DVD player, and *The Magnificent Ambersons* began.

"Oh, Ally, thanks," he said.

"Hey, your DVD player's busted, and you really *should* see this."

For the next fifty minutes, Pete watched. The cast was similar, with only one different actor that he noticed, and from everything he'd read, this was substantially the same as the lost footage he'd heard about in his world. Welles's genius was apparent even in the butchered RKO release, but here it was undiluted, a clarity of vision that was almost overwhelming, and this version was *sad*, profoundly so, a tale of glory and inevitable decline.

When it ended, Pete felt physically drained, and sublimely happy.

"Closing time, Pete," Ally said. "Thanks again for dinner. I'm a fiend for Chinese." She gently herded him toward the door as he thanked her, again

and again. "Glad you liked it," she said. "We can talk about it tomorrow." She closed and locked the door, and Pete watched from a doorway across the street until the shop disappeared, just a few minutes after ten. The window *was* closing, the shop appearing for less time each night.

He'd just have to enjoy it while it lasted. You couldn't ask more of a miracle than it was willing to give.

The next night he brought kung pao chicken and asked what her favorite movies were. She led him to the Employee Picks shelf and showed him her selections. "It's mostly nostalgia, but I still love *The Lunch Bunch*—you know, the sequel to *The Breakfast Club*, set ten years later? Molly Ringwald's awesome in it. And *Return of the Jedi*, I know a lot of people hate it, but it's one of the best movies David Lynch ever directed, I thought *Dune* was a muddle, but he really got to the heart of the *Star Wars* universe, it's so much darker than *The Empire Strikes Back*. Jason and the Argonauts by Orson Welles, of course, that's on everybody's list. . . ."

Pete found himself looking at her while she talked, instead of at the boxes of the movies she enthused over. He wanted to see them, of course, every one, but he wouldn't be able to, and really, he was talking to a woman from *another universe*, and that was as remarkable as anything he'd ever seen on a screen. She was smart, funny, and knew as much about movies as he did. He'd never dated much—he was more comfortable alone in the dark in front of a screen than he was sitting across from a woman at dinner, and his relationships seldom lasted more than a few dates when the women realized movies were his main mode of recreation. But with Ally—he could talk to her. Their obsessions were congruent and complementary.

Or maybe he was just trying to turn this miracle into some kind of theatrical romance.

"You look really beautiful when you talk about movies," he said.

"You're sweet, Mr. Nickels."

Pete came the next three nights, a few minutes later each time, as the door appeared for shorter periods of time. Ally talked to him about movies, incredulous at the bizarre gaps in his knowledge—"You've never heard of Sara Hansen? She's one of the greatest directors of all time!" (Pete wondered if she'd died young in his world, or never been born at all.) Ally had a fondness for bad science fiction movies, especially the many Ed Wood films starring Bela Lugosi, who had lived several years longer in Ally's world, instead of dying during the filming of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. She liked good sci-fi movies, too, especially Ron Howard's *Ender's Game*. Pete regretted that he'd never see any of those films, beyond the snippets she showed him to illustrate her points, and he regretted even more that he'd soon be unable to see Ally at all, when the shop ceased to appear, as seemed inevitable. She understood character arcs, the use of color, the underappreciated skills of silent film actors, the bizarre audacity of pre-Hayes-Code-era films, the perils of voiceover, why an extended single-camera continuous scene was worth becoming rapturous about, why the animation of Ray Harryhausen was in some ways infinitely more satisfying than the slickest CGI. She was his *people*.

"Why do you like movies so much?" he asked on that third night, over a meal of Szechwan shrimp, she leaning on her side of the counter, he on his.

She chewed, thinking. "Somebody described the experience of reading great fiction as being caught up in a vivid continuous dream, and I think movies do that better than any other kind of story. Some people say the best movie isn't as good as the best book, and I say they're not watching the right movies, or else they're not watching them the right way. My life doesn't make a lot of sense sometimes, I'm hungry and lonely and cold, my parents are shit, I can't afford tuition for next semester, I don't know what I want to do when I graduate. But when I see a great film, I feel like I understand life a little better, and even not-so-great films help me forget the shitty parts of my life for a couple of hours. Movies taught me to be brave, to be romantic, to stand up for myself, to take care of my friends. I didn't have church or loving parents, but I had *movies*, cheap matinees when I cut school, videos after I saved up enough to buy a TV and player of my own. I didn't have a mentor, but I had Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Sure, movies can be a way to hide from life, but shit, sometimes you need to hide from life, to see a better life on the screen, to know life can be better than it is, or to see a worse life and realize how good you have it. Movies taught me not to settle for less." She took a swig from her water bottle. "That's why I love movies."

"Wow," Pete said. "That's . . . wow."

"So," she said, looking at him oddly. "Why do you pretend to like movies?" Pete frowned. "What? Pretend?"

"Hey, it's okay. You came in and said you were a big movie buff, but you don't even know who Sara Hansen is, you've never seen *Jason and the Argonauts*, you talk about actors starring in movies they didn't appear in . . . I mean, I figured you liked me, you didn't know how else to flirt with me or something, but I *like* you, and if you want to ask me out, you can, you don't have to be a movie trivia expert to impress me."

"I *do* like you," Pete said. "But I *love* movies. I really do."

"Pete . . . you thought Clark Gable was in *Gone with the Wind*." She shrugged. "Need I say more?"

Pete looked at the clock. He had fifteen minutes. "Wait here," he said. "I want to show you something."

He ran home. The run was getting easier. Maybe exercise wasn't such a bad idea. He filled a backpack with books from his reference shelves—*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Movies*, the *AFI Film Guide*, the previous year's *Video and DVD Guide*, others—then ran back. Panting, he set the heavy bag on the counter. "Books," he gasped. "Read," gasp, "See you," gasp, "tomorrow."

"Okay, Pete," Ally said, raising her eyebrow in that way she had. "Whatever you say."

Pete lurched out of the store, still breathing hard, and when he turned to look back, the door had already disappeared. It wasn't even ten yet. Time was running out, and even though Ally would soon leave his life forever, he couldn't let her think he was ignorant about their shared passion. The books might not be enough to convince her. Tomorrow, he'd show her something more.

Pete went in as soon as the door appeared, at nearly 9:30. Ally didn't waste time with pleasantries. She slammed down his copy of the *AFI Desk Reference* and said, "What the *hell* is going on?"

Pete took the bag off his shoulder, opened it, and withdrew his slim silver laptop, along with a CD wallet full of DVDs. "*Gone with the Wind*," he said, inserting a disc into the laptop, calling up the DVD controls, and fast forwarding to the first scene with Clark Gable.

Ally stared at the LCD screen, and Pete watched the reflected colors move against her face. Gable's voice, though tinny through the small speakers, was resonant as always.

Pete closed the laptop gently. "I *do* know movies," he said. "Just not exactly the same ones you do."

"This, those books, *you* . . . you're from another world. It's like . . . like . . ."

"Something out of the *Twilight Zone*, I know. But actually, *you're* from another world. Every night, for an hour or so—less, lately—the door to Impossible Dreams appears on my street.

"What? I don't understand."

"Come on," he said, and held out his hand. She took it, and he led her out the door. "Look," he said, gesturing to the bakery next door, the gift shop on the other side, the bike repair place across the street.

Ally sagged back against the door, half-retreating inside the shop. "This isn't right. This isn't what's supposed to be here."

"Go on back in," he said. "The store has been appearing later and vanishing sooner every night, and I'd hate for you to get stranded here."

"Why is this happening?" Ally said, still holding his hand.

"I don't know," Pete said. "Maybe there's no reason. Maybe in a movie there would be, but . . ."

"Some movies reassure us that life makes sense," Ally said. "And some movies remind us that life doesn't make any sense at all." She exhaled roughly. "And some things don't have anything to do with movies."

"Bite your tongue," Pete said. "Listen, keep the laptop. The battery should run for a couple of hours. There's a spare in the bag, all charged up, which should be good for a couple more hours. Watching movies really sucks up the power, I'm afraid. I don't know if you'll be able to find an adapter to charge the laptop in your world—the standards are different. But you can see a couple of movies at least. I gave you all my favorite DVDs, great stuff by Hayao Miyazaki, Beat Takeshi, Wes Anderson, some classics . . . take your pick."

"Pete . . ."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "It's been so good talking to you these past few nights." He tried to think of what he'd say if this was the last scene in a movie, his *Casablanca* farewell moment, and a dozen appropriate quotes sprang to mind. He dismissed all of them. "I'm going to miss you, Ally."

"Thank you, Pete," she said, and went, reluctantly, back into Impossible Dreams. She looked at him from the other side of the glass, and he raised his hand to wave just as the door disappeared.

Pete didn't let himself go back the next night, because he knew the temptation to go into the store would be too great, and it might only be

open for ten minutes this time. But after pacing around his living room for hours, he finally went out after ten and walked to the place the store had been, thinking maybe she'd left a note, wishing for some closure, some final-reel gesture, a rose on the doorstep, something.

But there was nothing, no door, no note, no rose, and Pete sat on the sidewalk, wishing he'd thought to photograph Ally, wondering which movies she'd decided to watch, and what she'd thought of them.

"Hey, Mr. Nickels."

Pete looked up. Ally stood there, wearing a red coat, his laptop bag hanging from her shoulder. She sat down beside him. "I didn't think you'd show, and I did *not* relish the prospect of wandering in a strange city all night with only fifty dollars in nickels to keep me warm. Some of the street names are the same as where I'm from, but not enough of them for me to figure out where you lived."

"Ally! What are you doing here?"

"You gave me those *books*," she said, "and they all talk about *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles, how it transformed cinema." She punched him gently in the shoulder. "But you didn't give me the DVD!"

"But . . . everyone's seen *Citizen Kane*!"

"Not where I'm from. The print was destroyed. Hearst knew the movie was based on his life, and he made a deal with the studio, the guards looked the other way, and someone destroyed the film. Welles had to start over from nothing, and he made *Jason and the Argonauts* instead. But you've got *Citizen Kane*! How could I *not* come see it?"

"But Ally . . . you might not be able to go back."

She laughed, then leaned her head on his shoulder. "I don't plan to go back. There's nothing for me there."

Pete felt a fist of panic clench in his chest. "This isn't a movie," he said.

"No," Ally said. "It's better than that. It's my life."

"I just don't know—"

Ally patted his leg. "Relax, Pete. I'm not asking you to take me in. Unlike Blanche Dubois—played by Jessica Tandy, not Vivian Leigh, where I'm from—I don't depend on the kindness of strangers. I ran away from home when I was fifteen, and never looked back. I've started from nothing before, with no friends or prospects or ID, and I can do it again."

"You're not starting from nothing," Pete said, putting his arm around her. "Definitely not." The lights weren't going to come up, the curtain wasn't coming down; this wasn't the end of a movie. For once, Pete liked his life better than the vivid continuous dream of the screen. "Come on. Let's go watch *Citizen Kane*."

They stood and walked together. "Just out of curiosity," he said. "Which movies did you watch on the laptop?"

"Oh, none. I thought it would be more fun watching them with you."

Pete laughed. "Ally, I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. "You sound like you're quoting something," she said, "but I don't know what."

"We've got a lot of watching to do," he said.

"We've got a lot of *everything* to do," Ally replied. ○

SNAIL STONES

Paul Melko

Paul lives in Ohio with his beautiful wife and three fairly wonderful children. The youngest was born last September and has been a handful from the start. The elder two are already teaching him how to sass back. Paul enjoys gardening in the summer, and employs his daughter in the pursuit and capture of garden pests, including Japanese beetles, ladybugs, and, indeed, snails. None of the latter have been as large as the one in this story, but if one were, it might go a long way to explain the huge slime tracks and missing fencing. Paul's last story for us, "The Walls of the Universe," appeared in our April/May 2006 issue.

“Who’s that wagger?” Edeo asked. He was so distracted by the cloaked figure he missed the ball Haron had bounced off the wall of the abandoned building, and it rolled across the sewer grate, bumbling like a pachinko ball before disappearing into the foulness below.

“That’s great, Edeo! That was our only ball.”

But Edeo’s attention was on the grey-coated man who couldn’t have looked more conspicuous, head darting left and right, arms clutching a bundle of sackcloth.

Haron scooted on his belly by the grate, finger brushing slimy water, trying to find the ball.

“Who cares who he is?” Haron said. “Unless he has some more balls.”

Edeo, oblivious to Haron’s effort to extract the ball, edged between the two warehouses to get a better look at the figure. He climbed a pile of rubble.

"It's Fruge, the jeweler," he said. "My new dad bought my mom a ring from him. Then he hocked it for ringseed ale."

"It's Fruge, so what?" Haron said, certain that Edeo should be the one fishing for the ball. His fingers touched something furry. He pulled his hand out with a squeal.

Fruge, some hundred meters away, turned, searching the broken buildings for the sound. Edeo dropped down among the rubble pieces. "Shush, now. He'll see us, you breather."

"So? He ain't the muni."

Haron, angry that he had screamed like a little kid, stuck his hand back in, now searching for the rodent and the ball. Either would be fun to play with.

Fruge stared at the derelict buildings. He was clearly doing something nefarious, Edeo thought. He fumbled in his pocket with one hand while the other clutched the cloth to his chest.

"Holy Captain. He's got a gun."

Haron turned his head, hand still in the grate. "A gun?"

"He's coming this way."

Something brushed Haron's hand and he squeezed. "Hey, I got the ball!" He tried to pull his hand out, but his fist was too thick to fit between the bars of the grate. Something chittered in the darkness.

Haron watched Fruge advance on them. He was still a long way off, and he had no doubt that they could outrun the pudgy man in the ruins near the spaceport. He and Edeo were small and knew a lot of good hiding places they shouldn't have, given that their moms had forbidden them to come to the old abandoned firstfall zone.

Edeo was mesmerized by Fruge's gun. He'd never seen one; they were illegal. Why was Fruge carrying one? It was obvious after a moment; Fruge was a jeweler. He had to carry a gun for protection.

Haron, having banged his fist against the bars a dozen times, was convinced he couldn't bring the ball through the grate while holding it. He peered down into the sewer. Stupid ball. Edeo had picked the biggest one on the ball tree, of course.

"Who's there?" Fruge cried. "I have a gun." He waved it. "Don't come near me."

"What's he squawking on about?" Haron asked.

"He's afraid," Edeo replied. "We'd better go. He might mistake us for robbers."

"Not without my ball."

"We'll get another one."

"Not until tonight!" The ball tree was in Mr. Hebway's garden. Any balls that fell, he burned in his incinerator instead of giving them to the kids. No way he'd let them have one, even if they asked. They'd have to climb the fence and tree in the dark.

"Come on," Edeo said. He scrambled down the rubble pile.

"No way!"

Haron reached in with his other hand, cupping the ball. He let go and then pushed it through the grate. "I got it."

Edeo peered around the rubble. Fruge was running at them.

"Come on!"

The sound of thunder erupted above, and radiant heat basked them in warmth. The cargo ship sprayed orange flame as it drove into the sky. The boys paused, watching the rocket climb. They'd come to watch it anyway, but then been distracted.

"Wow," Edeo said, forgetting Fruge for the moment. It was off to High-point, where the bigger spline ships docked. Edeo couldn't imagine that the spline ships were hundreds of times bigger than the simple rockets that launched from the spaceport.

When the rocket had finally become just a blur of red, they remembered Fruge. But when they turned, he was gone, perhaps scared by the sound of the rocket.

"What's that?" Edeo asked. Where Fruge had been standing, something twinkled in the sunlight.

Haron and Edeo ran for it, Haron edging Edeo out by a hair. He scooped the glittering thing up, then dropped it as if it were a snake.

Edeo skidded to a stop, his hand frozen. The shape and size made it obvious, but he'd never seen one so big. The boys looked at each other. Then Edeo reached down to pick it up.

"Snail stone."

Haron was at Edeo's door five minutes after dinner.

"You got it?" he whispered.

Edeo's mom was busy on the vid with her friends, all six faces on the screen showing a similar head covered with a checked cloth. His step-father was collapsed on the couch sipping a ringseed. That left just his older brother Gremon to arch a brow and say, "Got what?"

"Nothing," Edeo and Haron said in unison.

"I bet," Gremon said, standing up from the table to block Edeo's way out of the kitchen. Edeo had the snail stone in his back pocket, and he knew Gremon well enough to know he'd search him until he found the artifact in question.

He sighed, as if in resignation, then tipped Gremon's plate of food out of his hand. While Gremon juggled the plate, Edeo slid under the table. Edeo and Haron were almost to the stairwell fire door when gravity finally won the battle and Gremon's plate clattered to the floor, breaking in pieces.

They shared a quick grin, though Edeo knew he'd pay later. It was worth it.

"You got it?" Haron asked again.

"Yeah," Edeo said.

Instead of heading out into the courtyard, they kept going down, sliding between boxes in the space under the last flight of stairs. Haron switched on his flashlight as Edeo pulled out the snail stone.

It felt like a rock in Edeo's hand, cold and heavy, but it didn't look like a rock. It shimmered with orange light, cutting the flashlight's beam into prisms. Edeo turned his hand, and the prisms danced on the wall.

"You sleep with it under your bed and your willy gets longer," Haron said.

"Does not!" Edeo replied, though truth be told, he wasn't sure. People said the snail stones did all sorts of things, that they powered rockets, caused cold fusion, cured colds. Why else did the government decide they owned them all?

"How much you think it's worth?"

"We can't ask Fruge, that's for sure," Edeo said.

"Lotta jewelers," Haron said.

Footsteps on the stair, and Haron snapped off the flashlight. The steps stopped, as if the soft click had been enough to alert the stepper.

With extra-fraternal senses, Edeo knew it was Gremon. He held his breath, willed Haron to do the same. Haron sensed his friend's fear and remained silent, waiting.

Finally, the steps continued and the courtyard door swung open and closed.

They waited. It wasn't above Gremon to fool them from their hiding places with a fake door opening. Then a chatting couple came in, and that was enough for the two. They slipped up the steps and, with an eye for Gremon, headed for the Guild district.

Most of the shops were closed, the gemologists and dealers off to their homes. Fruge's shop was closed tight. None of the shops displayed any snail stones in their barred windows.

"Tomorrow?" Edeo asked. He was thinking he'd slip the stone under his mattress for safe-keeping.

"Nah," Haron said. "Here."

The place was a pawn shop. A few rings lined the front display windows. A neon sign flickered, revealed that the shop was open twenty-two hours.

They pushed through the revolving door into the cluttered shop. Junk lined the walls; space suits hung next to stringless violins. Two rows of trikes sat covered in dust, one of them a Keebler Three-X.

"We'll be able to buy two of those with this," Haron whispered.

"You think?"

"I ain't buying anymore trikes!"

A head had popped up through a glass partition at the back of the store.

"We don't got no trikes," Haron said.

"Well, you don't look like you can buy one, either of you. What you want?"

Edeo nudged Haron forward in front of him. They stepped to within two meters of the pawnbroker. He was old enough to be second generation. Wispy white hair medusaed around his head.

"Snail stones," Haron said. "How much one of those go for?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "You trying to trick old Kort? You working with the munis, seeing if I'm on the up and up?" His voice rose as if he were addressing someone beyond the room, listening in. "I don't traffic in restricted items, no sir."

Haron was annoyed. "Yeah, but how much would it be worth if you did?"

The pawnbroker peered down at Haron. His eyes had a devious look to them, as if he'd just made a decision to do a bad thing for his own good.

"What you find in your granddame's attic? Something that should have been turned in years ago? Something forgotten?"

Edeo backed away, hand deep in his pocket, cupping the snail stone.

"We didn't find nothing!" Haron said, standing fast.

The booth the pawnbroker sat in flew up to the ceiling with a whoosh, leaving the old man standing in front of Haron. He reached out with a fist and took hold of Haron's shirt, dragging him forward with one hand while the other dug into Haron's pants pocket.

"What you got there, pinter? What'd you find?"

Edeo ran, abandoning Haron for the gem's safety. But when he slammed into the revolving door, it held fast.

"Maybe you've got the stone," the man cried.

"We don't have nothing," Edeo screamed. "It was all Gremon's idea. He sent us in to ask!"

The old man's strength seemed to flag, and Haron's feet touched the ground. He pulled away and huddled with Edeo in the pie-shaped slot of the revolving door.

"A trick? You playing a trick on old Kort?"

The old man spat at them, then kicked a lever with his feet. The reluctant door whipped them around and spat them onto the street. They ran, then, ducking between two women window shopping in the dusk.

Edeo ran only as far as the first turn, then he sagged against a solar shield booth, rusted and left over from before the atmosphere was thick enough. The thing was covered in graffiti, but the seats were relatively clean, so they sat there under the lead shielding and took deep breaths.

"They're on the munis' restricted lists," Haron finally said.

"Yeah."

"We staying out?" Haron asked after awhile.

"Ain't going home," Edeo replied. Gremon was sure to beat the crap out of him when he got there, unless he planned it right.

They sat there until the sun was long gone.

"Look there," Haron said. "Fruge."

Indeed the jeweler had stepped out of his dark shop and was glancing left and right as he locked his door.

"Looking mighty suspish, ain't he?" Edeo said.

"Mighty."

Without a word, they left the confines of the solar shield, ambling with precise nonchalance in the same direction as Fruge, but on the other side of the street.

"He's going back to the spaceport," Edeo said, when he took a sudden turn.

"Sell his jewels off planet. Only place he can, I bet, if they're on the restricted lists," Haron said.

Edeo glanced at his friend. Sometimes he made a lot of sense.

Fruge kept throwing glances over his shoulder, and finally Edeo pulled Haron aside into a dark side street, certain Fruge'd see the duo soon.

"We know where he's going," Edeo said. "Come on." They ran through the side streets for the spaceport, trying to reach the corner where they had seen Fruge earlier in the day.

Panting, they found a crumbled doorway that gave them a view of two streets.

"There he is," Haron said.

In the dark, he was little more than a bumbling shadow, but clearly it was him, edging down the street, looking over his shoulder.

"Probably has his gun," Edeo said.

Fruge stopped before he reached the intersection, slipping into a doorway. They heard the jingle of keys, then the scrape of a door opening.

"I thought all these warehouses were abandoned," Edeo said. When the new spaceport terminal went in on the far side of the landing fields, there'd been no need to keep up these old buildings. Old Firstfall had crumbled into decay.

"Not," said Haron.

Light flickered from within the building, barely visible through blinded windows in the basement. Edeo and Haron shared a quick grin in the darkness and slipped from their hiding place.

Fruge had gone to some trouble to cover the windows, using tape to wedge a curtain across all of the glass. But at some point, the tape had dried up, and a corner of the curtain had drooped to reveal the inside of the building.

Haron was there first, kneeling and pushing his eye into the space. Edeo danced around him, tried the other two windows to no avail.

"Watcha see?"

"Shhh," Haron said, not because he was afraid Fruge would hear them but rather because he had nothing to report. All he saw was an empty, cement-block-lined basement.

Then Fruge appeared, coming down steps on the far side of the basement. He carried a bag. He laid it on the ground and drew from it a crowbar. Then he pulled open a door and thrust the crowbar into the small dark space beyond. He wiggled it, urging something forth. He reached in and grabbed a rope and pulled.

Something moved forward in a huddle, sliding across the floor. When Haron saw what it was, he jumped back, which was enough for Edeo to take his place at the window.

Edeo gasped. He turned to his friend and said, "He has a snail."

It was just stuff everybody knew, stuff from school, stuff from parents, stuff from older brothers. The colony ship arrived with eminent domain. There was no way the ship was going back! That would have been outrageous.

And the snails weren't even that intelligent. No tools, no language, no cities. Not really molluscs, but they looked enough like their namesake, if two meters tall instead of two millimeters. How can a snail be sentient?

And when humans figured out you could pry the pretty gems off their carapaces and they'd grow back, well. That was just another resource to be used. The fact that the crystals had different compositions depending on what you fed the snails, that was just grease for the herding and round-up of twenty million slugs.

By the time Edeo and Haron were born, there wasn't a snail on the

northern continent, and only a handful on the southern. But Fruge had one in the basement of that abandoned building, and he was prying the gems loose to sell. And now Edeo and Haron knew.

They shared a horrified glance, and then they ran. They ran home as fast as they could in the face of this unfathomable perversion, all the way home.

They skidded to a halt outside Edeo's building, their chests heaving, their legs leaden.

"We should tell. . . ." Haron started, then stopped.

Edeo shook his head, then they swore each other to silence and promised to meet the next day. Haron asked for the stone, but Edeo swore it would be safe with him. He snuck it upstairs to the room he shared with Gremon without seeing his brother and slipped it under his mattress. Perhaps Gremon would forget all about the indignity Edeo had foisted upon him. But probably not.

Haron, sworn to secrecy about their snail, was not so sworn on snails in general.

"Mom, any snails around here?" he asked.

"Snails all gone, sweetie," she replied, her head mounted unmoving in front of the vid.

"Yeah, any still around?"

"In the zoo, maybe. Maybe on the south continent. Shush now. My favorite part."

Haron shrugged and went off to bed, sleeping fitfully on his mattress that protected no stone. Edeo slept just as poorly, but they both met ready the next morning.

"What happened to you?"

Edeo touched his tender eye. "Gremon."

"Yeah. Got it?"

"Got it."

"We should go to the zoo. See if there's any snails there," Haron said.

Edeo shook his head. "Naw. Zoo's three buses away. Take all day."

"What then?"

"Where's Fruge right now?"

"In his store."

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"He's there all day, right?" Edeo said. "He's not with the snail."

"What are you saying?"

Edeo said, "Let's go look at the snail right here."

Haron shook his head, but he already knew he'd be going with Edeo. They walked back to the spaceport ruins, hiding in their doorway, waiting until they were sure the building was empty, then they sauntered across the road and tried the door.

"Locked," Haron said.

Edeo knelt down and jiggled the window they'd looked through the night before.

"Locked too," Haron said.

Edeo surveyed the street; he walked along the length of the building. The building to the left was in a much worse state of decay than Fruge's. Its door hung off its hinges and it looked liked squatters had camped there not too long ago. Both buildings were the same height.

"Roof," Edeo said. They pushed their way through the door, blinking in the darkness. Right there, steps led up. Edeo took them first, testing each one with his weight. On the first landing, rats scurried away into dark shadows.

"Cool," Haron said.

They found a ladder on the top floor that opened onto the roof. From there they had a fabulous view of the spaceport. A dozen rockets stood beside gangways, ready to ride fire into the sky. They paused to write the numbers on their fins in Haron's book.

Though the two buildings had looked the same height, Fruge's in fact was a couple of meter lower. Edeo jumped down, rolling on the gravel-tar. Haron shook his head and dropped down after hanging by his arms first.

The roof door was locked, but the lock was so rusted that it gave when Edeo pulled on it. Down they walked, eyes alert for snails in dark corners.

"Whoa!" Haron said. He had nearly stepped into darkness. The entire first floor was demolished, leaving a view into the basement from the second floor. All that was left was a narrow path to the basement stairs.

They fell to their stomachs and looked over the edge. The door behind which the snail was caged was invisible in the darkness.

"No way down," Haron said.

"Rope," Edeo said.

"No way, man," Haron said. "It's just a snail."

"Fruge is *using* it," Edeo said. "Don't you see? We have to help it."

"This isn't about getting more jewels?"

"No!"

"Quiet!"

The door of the building opened, and Fruge entered. Light filled the basement as he hit the switch. He carried a bundle.

Fruge took the steps carefully, then threw his bundle on the ground. It clattered and clanked, revealing that it was metal parts: junk.

He opened the door and used the rope to pull the snail out. In the dim bulbs of the basement, the snail's carapace glittered with rainbow iridescence. There were no jewels, though Fruge hunted for any that might have formed. He shined a flashlight around the edges of the snail, which

tried to slide away from him, but appeared to have no purchase on the floor.

"Nothing!" Fruge muttered. "Nothing growing on you today."

He crossed to the bundle and pulled out what looked like a handful of steel ball bearings.

"See what this will do, eh? I lost one, so I need another fast."

The snail's head disappeared under its shell as Fruge approached, but he reached right in and grasped it by the swirling antennae, of which the snail had three. The head popped out, and Fruge wedged its mouth open with a knee. He dropped the ball bearings in, and then held the mouth closed.

"I've been trying to find cobalt, but who carries that? It costs more to feed you than I can make in gems off your back. Can't get but a tenth what they're worth due to the munis."

The snail shook its head, trying to dislodge its food, tossing its head and grunting. Fruge took a handful of nuts and bolts, pulled open the snail's mouth again, and forced them in.

It slurped and burred, choking, but the snail was unable to dislodge what was forced into its mouth, unable to vomit. It grunted and twisted, but Fruge held it steady with a grip on its tender antennae.

Edeo and Haron watched as Fruge again filled the snail's gullet with bits of metal, even some glass and rocks, all sorts of junk, waiting until the material disappeared from its mouth. When the bag was empty, he pushed the snail back into its cave and left.

Edeo said to Haron, "See? We have to help."

Haron nodded slowly.

The rope they stole from Edeo's house. For a time, his father had held a job as a painter, until he'd started showing up too drunk to climb a ladder. But he still had a neat coil of rope that Edeo snuck from his "workshop" one night while he was passed out on the couch. They gathered lillweed seeds and scattered them all over the street outside the building. As every child knew, a lillweed seed had a bit of compressed air inside that it used to blow itself far from its parent; but, before autumn came, the seeds made excellent noise toys, or, in this case, early warning systems. The third thing they gathered was native plants.

This proved rather difficult. The colony ship had brought fine strains of plants that ousted the local varieties with little effort. There didn't seem to be a tree in Old Firstfall that wasn't an oak, maple, or elm.

Finally Edeo said, "Ball trees didn't come from Earth."

"No?"

"No way." They looked over the fence at Mr. Hebway's garden.

"Look at that," Haron said. In addition to the ball tree, Hebway had lillweed plants, rotordendrends, rozes, and blue-eyed susies. Instead of stealing balls, that night they took handfuls of the native plants, ripping them up by the root or breaking their stems.

The next day, after they were certain Fruge was well ensconced in his store, they scattered the lillweed seed up and down the street. Then they climbed the building, knotted the rope every foot, and lowered it down to the basement level.

Edeo glanced at Haron, and Haron shrugged his shoulders. They did stoness with their fingers and Edeo lost. He reached for the rope and descended hand-over-hand into the basement, some six meters down.

"Toss it down," he whispered, then louder, "Toss it down."

Haron dropped the bundle of native plants, and they fell with a thwack on the basement floor.

"Come on."

Haron descended, and they turned to face the snail's door.

"Maybe we can just toss it through the door," Haron said.

Edeo shook his head. The door was wooden, painted grey, and peeling. It shut with a simple latch. He took a step toward it, then another, and finally reached forward to undo the latch before backpedaling away. The door squeaked, then slowly tilted open thirty degrees before scraping on the concrete floor. Darkness lay within.

Edeo peered into the space. The snail peered back with its floppy antennae. It emitted a chuff, its mucous membrane rattling above its maw. A whiff of iron, blood-like, washed over him.

"Phew."

"Maybe it's saying 'Hi,'" Haron said.

"Or 'Where's Fruge?'"

Edeo took the bundle of native flora in his hands, reached toward the snail with it. The snail twisted its three antennae, craned them in three directions as if to get a trinocular view of the proffered vegetable matter. Then it jumped forward with more speed than Edeo had thought possible, slurping the material into its gullet.

Edeo fumbled backward, surprised by the speed. Its face was grey and eyeless. The antennae swarmed and danced, taking in the boys and their food. Its mouth, shaped into a perpetual underbite, was twenty-five centimeters wide and opened into its flabby, sack-like gullet.

Haron said, "We certainly didn't have to force feed the thing like Fruge."

"No," Edeo said, mesmerized by the massive snail. It was taller than he was by twenty centimeters and he was taller than Haron.

The snail chuffed again, then burbled. It advanced, then stopped with a jingle. Haron realized that the snail's shell was chained to the wall of its cave.

"That wagger welded him to the wall!"

Edeo picked up the rest of the bundle and fed it piece by piece to the snail. When the last of the material had disappeared, the snail sent an antenna slithering around Edeo's palm, leaving a trail of mucous.

"Ick," he said.

Haron laughed, then jumped as another antenna entered his pocket faster than he could back away.

"Hey!"

But then the feeler had withdrawn, holding the ball that he'd picked from Mr. Hebway's ball tree. The snail ate it.

"That was our last ball."

"Yeah," said Edeo. "We're going to need a whole bunch more."

* * *

They couldn't keep raiding Mr. Hebway's garden; he'd have noticed pretty quickly at the rate the snail consumed plants. But with the flora in the garden as a guide, the two managed to find small sanctuaries of native plants within a few kilometers of the building. In fact, the fields around the spaceport housed a dozen prairie fields of gila grass, bleet weed, and curdleberries. Of these, the snail showed a distinct bias toward the gila grass, eating this first before anything else.

They visited the snail every day, determining Mr. Fruge's schedule quickly. He came every other day with a load of metal to feed the snail. At the same time, he scoured its shell for any new jewels that were forming, and if they were large enough, he pried them off with a crowbar, causing the snail to erupt in mucousy, blubbery moans.

Watching Fruge feed the snail nauseated Edeo. Finally, after one such feeding, Edeo immediately descended when Fruge left, stuck his hand down the snail's throat, and retrieved as much of the metal as he could.

"What are you doing?" Haron shrilled.

"Getting this crap out of our snail!"

"Our snail?"

Edeo dumped a pile of nails on the floor. His arm up to his shoulder was covered in slime.

"Yeah. We treat him way better than Fruge," Edeo said.

The snail sat obediently as Edeo emptied its gullet, then it slid forward and rooted through the pile of junk. It took several blue-colored ball bearings in its tendrils and scooped them back into its mouth.

"It wants those, apparently," Haron said. The rest of the junk it left on the floor.

Edeo's head whipped around at the sound of popping on the street.

"Fruge!" he cried. "He's coming back!"

Haron jumped for the rope, scurrying up onto the second floor. "Come on!"

Edeo looked around the floor at the piles of slimy junk. Fruge would know for sure that someone had found his snail. Edeo grabbed a handful of the metal and threw it behind some barrels.

The popping sound grew louder.

"Come on, Edeo!" Haron said. "Leave it."

"No! Pull up the rope."

He took another handful, tossing the junk atop the rest with a clatter. He pushed the snail back into its cave and grabbed the last of the metal, hiding himself with the junk behind the barrels.

A key rattled in the lock of the door.

He searched the floor for some sign of them, then made sure Haron had pulled up the rope. Nothing in sight.

Then he saw the half-ajar door!

Cursing issued from the front door, as Fruge searched for the right key. Edeo bounded forward, slammed the door shut, slid the bolt, and dashed back to his spot just as the light flashed on.

Edeo listened and Haron watched from above as Fruge creaked down the steps. His bag jingled with scrap. Edeo crouched lower as he saw his shadow pass on the floor not far from him. Fruge opened the gate and dragged the snail out.

"You need more junk, I think, if I'm going to get more jewels," Fruge said.

Edeo listened, his anger growing, as Fruge stuffed their snail with heavy metal. After he had left and the last sounds of the lillweed seed popping under his feet had faded away, Haron descended again.

Edeo turned to him. "We have to get our snail out of here."

They tried a hacksaw that Haron had swiped from a trike repair shop while Edeo distracted the owner, but the blade didn't even scratch the chain that held the snail in its cave. The far end was embedded in the rock wall, not into plaster, but into granite with spikes that must have been twenty centimeters long. The only thing that had any effect on the chain was a rasp file that Edeo stole from his step-dad's workshop, but it was soon clear it would take days of muscle-numbing work to get through the metal.

"This is useless," Haron said.

Edeo was bent over the back of the snail, rasping. The snail was sniffing at Haron's pocket for the ball he had hidden there. He giggled as the tendril plunged in and pulled it out. The snail was far better than a dog.

"Is not."

"Snail won't eat anything but curdleberries today. We'll have to go get some more."

Edeo looked up. "Not even the lillweed roots? He loved those before."

"Naw. Balls and curdleberries is all he's eating." Haron looked around. "And a kilo of copper wiring."

"Sheesh."

Haron's head tilted. "What was that?"

They pushed the snail back into its cave.

"It's way early for Fruge." After a week they had his comings and goings down: every other day to feed the snail and check for new jewels. And sometimes he brought a second load of metal, so they had to be careful.

Just as Haron was going for the rope, it jerked up into the air.

Someone laughed above them.

"Gremon," Edeo whispered fiercely.

"What you little boys doing in the basement all alone? Comparing sizes?" His head appeared over the edge.

"None of your business," Edeo said.

"Yeah? You think?" He slid down the rope, one hand out raised. "Let's see what you're doing down here."

Edeo moved to stand in front of the gate, casually with one hand on the wall. Gremon looked around the basement, smiled once at Edeo. "What's behind the door?"

He pushed Edeo out of the way, pulled the door open.

"Marbles? Dirty pictures? Rock co—" His voice shriveled inside him, as he backed away. He pushed Edeo in front of him. "What!" He tripped over his own feet as the snail slid forward waving its antennae. A weird trilling sound came from the snail, one that Haron and Edeo had never heard before.

Gremon ran up the steps, his face white, his pants wet. He slammed

against the locked door, turned the lock with fumbling hands, and disappeared into the street.

The snail's trilling turned to a heavy chuff.

"I think he's laughing," Haron said, rubbing under the snail's mouth.

Edeo watched the door swing shut. "Huh," he said.

"You know what you got there?" Gremon was hanging over the top bunkbed, his head dark against the grey ceiling.

"No."

"Hell! It's a snail, Edeo. A snail! You know what that means?"

"No. What?"

"Snails grow gems on their backs if you feed it the right crap. You hear me? Gems."

"I know."

"You feed it iron, it grows emerald. You feed it copper, it grows diamonds. You feed it—"

"They're not really diamonds and emeralds," Edeo replied. What the snails grew weren't found naturally.

"We could be rich."

"We?"

"Yeah, we, little boy."

Edeo stared up at his brother. "You breathe a word, little boy," he said softly, "and Nelli Ione learns you pissed your pants."

Gremon was silent. This was all Edeo had over him. He hoped it would work.

A dark shape dropped from the top bunk. Pain shot up Edeo's arm, and he stifled a gasp.

"This isn't yours to keep, stupid. It's to use."

Then Gremon climbed back up into his bunk.

The next day, the snail thrashed around in its cave when they came to see it.

"Is it sick?" Haron asked.

"I dunno," Edeo said. He was still concerned about what Gremon would do. Perhaps he'd try to take the snail for himself.

The snail slammed its carapace against the stone walls of the alcove, again and again.

"What's wrong with it?" They dared not go near the thing. It weighed twice as much as they did together, and its shell was hard. They'd be smashed.

Finally it stopped and something tinkled inside its grotto.

"What was that?" Edeo asked.

The snail slid forward and Edeo leaned into the darkness. Something sparkled on the floor. He reached for it, but jerked his hand back.

He stuck his bleeding finger in his mouth.

Haron shined the flashlight. "It's a gem."

This was the first gem they'd seen the snail grow since they'd started feeding it a week earlier.

"It's sharp."

Edeo reached for it again, carefully. It was metallic, not a gem stone at all. It was heavy, like lead. One edge was rounded and had indentations in it. The other edge was sharp. It looked like a clamming knife the divers at the ocean used to open crustaceans.

The snail shook itself and its chain jingled.

Edeo and Haron shared a look. Edeo then bent down and started sawing at the chain with the stone. In the light of Haron's flashlight, they saw the stone had chipped the metal. The stone was cutting the chain.

"It grew a saw!" Haron said.

Edeo worked until his arm was too sore to continue, then Haron took a turn. By noon they were halfway through the link, and so engrossed in the process they failed to hear Fruge's arrival until he flung open the door.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Edeo and Haron backed away from the snail. Haron eyed the rope, then the gun in Fruge's hand. No way he'd make it.

Fruge took the steps, his eyes riveted on the two kids.

"This explains what happened to my supply of gems. You two have been feeding my snail the wrong stuff." He kicked at the pile of curdleberry leaves. "Do you know what you've cost me?"

"You can't do this to a snail," Edeo said, his voice cracking halfway through.

"Just shut up," Fruge said. "I can do whatever I want with *my* snail. And that includes feeding you to it."

The snail charged at Fruge, coming up just short on the end of the chain.

"Look what you did!" Fruge yelled. "You made it crazy!"

The snail lurched again, pulling the chain tight.

"If I have to get a new snail because of you," Fruge said, "I'm going to chain you both to the wall and feed you iron scrap."

The snail backed up into its cave.

"That's right. Back in your cave."

But the snail wasn't submitting, it was getting some distance.

It charged.

For a moment, Edeo was certain the chain would hold, but the weakened link gave way with a snap and the snail was on top of Fruge.

"He's going to eat him," Haron said, with some amount of relish.

Fruge screamed and the gun flew from his hand as he tried to fight off the snail. The snail rolled right over him, covering his head, then backed up so it could roll over him again with its giant foot.

"He's not going to eat him," Edeo said. "That's not his mouth down there; it's his foot."

"He's sliming him," Haron said, which was better.

The snail rolled off Fruge, found his gun and stowed it in its gullet with a slurp.

Fruge stood, his body dripping snail slime in huge dollops. He coughed.

"I'm going to kill you with my bare hands."

The snail lunged at him then, and Fruge backed up. Fruge tried to

move around it, but the snail was far faster than he. Fruge backed into the cave.

Edeo slammed the door shut and Haron threw the bolt.

"That'll never hold him."

But the snail had apparently realized that and was pushing barrels in front of it, as well as crates and other bits of junk that lined the walls of the basement.

Surveying Fruge's cage, Edeo said, "Let's get out of here."

Haron looked at the snail. "What about him?"

Edeo looked up at the rope, wondering if they could haul the snail out, but he need not have worried. The snail slithered up the steps, its flexible foot molding itself to the stairs. It was up to the landing in seconds, pushing open the door.

It hesitated there, its antennae waving around.

"It's probably never been outside," Haron said.

"It's scared."

Edeo and Haron walked around it and stood out in the middle of the street, waving it on.

Finally the snail scooted out of the building and into the open.

Edeo grinned. "We'll take it to my house. It can live in my room. Then Gremon can't bully me anymore. It can make me gems whenever I want. We'll be rich. . . ."

Haron looked at Edeo, his eyebrows raised.

Edeo caught his friend's look.

"I mean—"

"We'd be no better than that wagger," Haron said with a nod toward the building. Edeo paused, sipping at his dream one last time.

"No," Edeo said. "I guess not. Then where?"

"He likes curdleberries." He pointed to the spaceport, where the tarmacs were surrounded with native flora. "Of course, we could take the long way."

By the time they reached their street, they had quite a parade: dozens of children, the mailman, shop clerks, a team of street cleaners, even Gremon followed.

The snail slid happily along, unperturbed by it all, as if it was expecting a parade.

A magistrate caught up to them on Jury Street.

"What is this? Where did this snail come from?"

Edeo was brave enough to answer.

"Fruge had him chained in a vacant building by the spaceport." He showed the magistrate the soldered end of the chain. "We're taking him to the spaceport so he can eat."

"Fruge," the magistrate said, with undisguised venom. He sent a muni to the vacant building, then accompanied the parade to the spaceport where he had one of the bumbling maintenance men open the gate so that the snail could crawl into the fields of lillweed and curdleberry bushes. In the distance, on the far side of the spaceport, a rocket roared into the sky. The snail cocked one antenna at it as it munched contentedly on a tuft of vegetation.

It chuffed once at Edeo and Haron, then ambled off into the prairie. ○

FIREFLIES

Kathe Koja

Kathe Koja's new novel, *Going Under*, will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in September. She lives in the Detroit area with her husband, artist Rick Lieder. In her first story for us since November 1992, she takes a look at more than one dark side of the universe.

Look, he said. Look at all the stars.

Steep back steps, less porch than stoop, rusting wrought-iron railing and barely room enough for two, but they had once been lovers and so it was easy to sit touching, hip to thigh. His head back against the screen door mesh, looking up; on her right arm a fresh bandage, white and still, like a large moth waiting with folded wings.

They look like fireflies, she said. Awkward, left-handed, she lit a cigarette; without being asked, the man opened her bottle of beer, an Egyptian beer called Stella, *star*. He had just come back from Cairo; she was going somewhere else.

Fireflies? he said. He had a kind of accent, not foreign but not native either: unplaceable long vowels, sentences that curled up at the ends, like genie's slippers, like the way they talk down south. One big backyard, to have fireflies that size?

Think of the grasshoppers, she said, and laughed, winced, dragged on her cigarette. The smoke rose in the darkness; it was very late. Or the dragonflies.

Or the June bugs, he said. His own beer was almost empty. What'd the doctor say?

She did not answer. The cement of the steps was damp, clammy against the backs of their legs; like a slab, a tomb, tombstone and Esperson called, she said. He told me they were taking my paper.

The, the vacuum one? Oh honey that's great! He pressed her leg, the bare skin below the edge of her cut-offs; his hand was warm, with long strong workman's fingers, small hard spots like rivets on the palm, his skin a topographic map of his days: cut wood, carry water, name and number and know all the plants in the world. Sometimes she imagined him out there in the green aether of the woods, any woods: mending a split sapling, digging arbutus, testing the soil. He the earth, she the void and When does it come out? he asked. When will you—

When do you leave again? she asked. Where are you going?

Montreal, he said, but not till December? or maybe the new year, I'm not sure. It depends on—It depends. When did Esperson say—

Look, she said, one hand out, her left hand with its tubed coal of cigarette. Fireflies; look. Above the dark drenched grass a ballet of on and off, little lights delicate, sturdy, irregular. From the porch they watched together in silence, a long wondering silence; he put his hand on her leg again, and squeezed, but absently; he sees this all the time, she thought. In the woods.

Your paper, he said. Tell me what it's about. In layman's terms?

Shifting a little on the steps, trying not to move her right arm. Basically, she said, it's about how most of what's out there, most of what's here—tapping her chest—is vacuum energy. The cosmos is one-third visible and dark matter, two-thirds vacuum energy.

He flicked away an insect, a mosquito, some tiny night-borne pest. I thought nature abhors a vacuum?

This kind keeps the universe expanding, she said. It resists the gravitational pull of the galaxies, and so—

And what?

She said nothing.

What's—hey, are you okay? Are you—

She did not answer; he looked into her face, peered through the darkness then at once looked away, his own mouth twisting down one-sided, like a stroke victim's, its curve the felt echo of her pain and You wan' go in? he asked, voice soft with alarm, his accent more pronounced. You wan' lie down, or—

No, harsh, fighting it, fighting herself; the hand with the cigarette trembled, its light like a firefly trapped in a jar until The doctor, he said at last, when she had finally calmed. He called me. . . . I'm still the emergency contact, you know?

She did not answer.

He said—

I know what he said. She took a last drag on the cigarette, let it drop and roll down the porch steps to the grass, dying red in a sea of silent green. We had a nice long talk.

There are things you can do. There are still things that you—

I'm not doing anything, she said. While you were in Cairo I was *doing things*, and what the fuck good did any of them do me? I'm sick of all that. She reached for the pack of cigarettes, but her grasp was unsteady and in her lurching motion her right side, right arm struck the black iron rail and she cried out, a brief excruciating cry; and he moaned, low and helpless, a noise unwilling as he tried to right her but No, she said through her teeth, no don't touch me, *don't*.

Silence: night sounds: when her gaze had cleared she saw that he was weeping and Don't, she said, unsteady, and put her left hand on his arm, just above the elbow, the way she always had. It's okay, it's all right—but still he wept, face up toward the night, the wet fierce glottals of a child until Don't make it worse, she said, to make him stop and he did, slowly, sucking in his breath and Get us another beer, she said, to help him.

When he had gone into the house again she laboriously lit another cig-

arette, sat smoking in the faint noises from inside: water running, the glass clink of bottles. The fireflies were back, as if her pain and his had scattered them like the shadow of some dark beast, but now in the beast's departure they were free again, to play, to go about their amatory errands and It's the males who light up, he said, back on the porch stoop, handing her a fresh beer. They do it for the girls? To get them to notice?

It must work, she said, or there wouldn't be fireflies.

Wonder if it's the same up there? pointing with his own beer into the starlit sky. Light matter and dark matter, you said? Like blinking on and off?

No, she said.

And the, the vacuum, it's what keeps them going, right? Keeps everything going?

Expanding, she said. It increases the rate of expansion.

Like this? he said, and touched not the bandage but the skin above it, so lightly it was almost no touch at all: and she stared at him through the dark, breath gathered in astounded and furious hurt but before she could speak You're expanding, he said, aren't you? Getting . . . more diffuse. Like a plant does, with seeds? Like these trees right here, poplars—when their pods split open, and all the seeds float away everywhere? That's you. With your work, and your articles, and, and who you are. . . . It just goes on. *You* go on. Resisting the pull, right?—But like poplars out *there*, pointing at the darkness. With the big fireflies?

She said nothing. Her throat felt full and tight, like a seed pod, ready to burst.

Big poplars, he said. Big seeds.

Neither spoke; her left hand took his right; their fingers linked. Finally: Read my paper, she said. When it comes out. Okay? Read it for me.

He squeezed her hand, squeezed it slow and twice and Yes, he said, I will. But I won't understand it.

You understand plenty, she said.

A breeze touched the leaves of the poplars. Past them, past the porch the fireflies moved, in the stars and the breathing night. ○

Science Fiction Sudoku Winners continued from page 71

Tying five-ways for second place were Phil Baringer, Lee Martin, John N. Marx, Rebecca Mayr, and Ruhan Zhao. These contestants received signed copies of Jack McDevitt's *Seeker*. Thanks are also due to the authors; their editor, Ginjer Buchanan; and Ace Books for helping out with the prizes. Ruth Crabtree, James Goreham, Sheryl Kolar, Rebecca Mayr, and Lyle Wiedeman all received honorable mentions. The second-place and honorable mention puzzles will be published with attributions in upcoming issues of *Asimov's*.

THE DJINN'S WIFE

Ian McDonald

"The Djinn's Wife" shares the same background of near-future India as Ian's last *Asimov's* story, "The Little Goddess" (June 2005), and his most recent novel, the 2005 Hugo-nominee *River of Gods* (Pyr). The author's current book-in-progress is *Brasyl*. Ian works in television program development, and lives just outside Belfast in Northern Ireland with the hills behind him and the sea before.

Once there was a woman in Delhi who married a djinn. Before the water war, that was not so strange a thing: Delhi, split in two like a brain, has been the city of djinns from time before time. The sufis tell that God made two creations, one of clay and one of fire. That of clay became man; that of fire, the *djinni*. As creatures of fire they have always been drawn to Delhi, seven times reduced to ashes by invading empires, seven times reincarnating itself. Each turn of the *chakra*, the djinns have drawn strength from the flames, multiplying and dividing. Great dervishes and brahmins are able to see them, but, on any street, at any time, anyone may catch the whisper and momentary wafting warmth of a djinn passing.

I was born in Ladakh, far from the heat of the djinns—they have wills and whims quite alien to humans—but my mother was Delhi born and raised, and from her I knew its circuses and boulevards, its *maidans* and *chowks* and bazaars, like those of my own Leh. Delhi to me was a city of stories, and so if I tell the story of the djinn's wife in the manner of a sufi legend or a tale from the Mahabharata, or even a *tivi* soap opera, that is how it seems to me: City of Djinns.

They are not the first to fall in love on the walls of the Red Fort.

The politicians have talked for three days and an agreement is close. In honor the Awadhi government has prepared a grand *darbar* in the great courtyard before the *Diwan-i-aam*. All India is watching so this spectacle is on a Victorian scale: event-planners scurry across hot, bare marble, hanging banners and bunting; erecting staging; setting up sound and light systems; choreographing dancers, elephants, fireworks, and a fly-past of combat robots; dressing tables; and drilling serving staff, and drawing up so-careful seating plans so that no one will feel snubbed by anyone else. All day three-wheeler delivery drays have brought fresh flowers, festival goods, finest, soft furnishings. There's a real French *sommelier* raving at what the simmering Delhi heat is doing to his wine-plan. It's a serious conference. At stake are a quarter of a billion lives.

In this second year after the monsoon failed, the Indian nations of Awadh and Bharat face each other with main battle tanks, robot attack helicopters, strikeware, and tactical nuclear slow missiles on the banks of the sacred river Ganga. Along thirty kilometers of staked-out sand, where brahmins cleanse themselves and *saddhus* pray, the government of Awadh plans a monster dam. Kunda Khadar will secure the water supply for Awadh's one hundred and thirty million for the next fifty years. The river downstream, that flows past the sacred cities of Allahabad and Varanasi in Bharat, will turn to dust. Water is life, water is death. Bharati diplomats, human and artificial intelligence aeai advisors, negotiate careful deals and access rights with their rival nation, knowing one carelessly spilled drop of water will see strike robots battling like kites over the glass towers of New Delhi and slow missiles with nanonuke warheads in their bellies creeping on cat-claws through the *galis* of Varanasi. The rolling news channels clear their schedules of everything else but cricket. A deal is close! A deal is agreed! A deal will be signed tomorrow! Tonight, they've earned their *darbar*.

And in the whirlwind of leaping *hijras* and parading elephants, a *Kathak* dancer slips away for a cigarette and a moment up on the battlements of the Red Fort. She leans against the sun-warmed stone, careful of the fine gold-threadwork of her costume. Beyond the Lahore Gate lies hiving Chandni Chowk; the sun a vast blister bleeding onto the smoke-stacks and light-farms of the western suburbs. The *chhatris* of the Sisganj Gurdwara, the minarets and domes of the Jama Masjid, the *shikara* of the Shiv temple are shadow-puppet scenery against the red, dust-laden sky. Above them pigeons storm and dash, wings wheezing. Black kites rise on the thermals above Old Delhi's thousand thousand rooftops. Beyond them, a curtain wall taller and more imposing than any built by the Mughals, stand the corporate towers of New Delhi, Hindu temples of glass and construction diamond stretched to fantastical, spiring heights, twinkling with stars and aircraft warning lights.

A whisper inside her head, her name accompanied by a spray of sitar: the call-tone of her palmer, transduced through her skull into her auditory center by the subtle 'hoek curled like a piece of jewelry behind her ear.

"I'm just having a quick *bidi* break, give me a chance to finish it," she complains, expecting Pranh, the choreographer, a famously tetchy third-sex nute. Then, "Oh!" For the gold-lit dust rises before her up into a swirl, like a dancer made from ash.

A djinn. The thought hovers on her caught breath. Her mother, though Hindu, devoutly believed in the *djinni*, in any religion's supernatural creatures with a skill for trickery.

The dust coalesces into a man in a long, formal *sherwani* and loosely wound red turban, leaning on the parapet and looking out over the glowing anarchy of Chandni Chowk. *He is very handsome*, the dancer thinks, hastily stubbing out her cigarette and letting it fall in an arc of red embers over the battlements. It does not do to smoke in the presence of the great diplomat A.J. Rao.

"You needn't have done that on my account, Esha," A.J. Rao says, pressing his hands together in a *namaste*. "It's not as though I can catch anything from it."

Esha Rathore returns the greeting, wondering if the stage crew down in the courtyard was watching her salute empty air. All Awadh knows those *filmi*-star features: A.J. Rao, one of Bharat's most knowledgeable and tenacious negotiators. *No*, she corrects herself. All Awadh knows are pictures on a screen. Pictures on a screen, pictures in her head; a voice in her ear. An aeai.

"You know my name?"

"I am one of your greatest admirers."

Her face flushes: a waft of stifling heat spun off from the vast palace's microclimate, Esha tells herself. Not embarrassment. Never embarrassment.

"But I'm a dancer. And you are an. . ."

"Artificial intelligence? That I am. Is this some new anti-aeai legislation, that we can't appreciate dance?" He closes his eyes. "Ah: I'm just watching the *Marriage of Radha and Krishna* again."

But he has her vanity now. "Which performance?"

"Star Arts Channel. I have them all. I must confess, I often have you running in the background while I'm in negotiation. But please don't mistake me, I never tire of you." A.J. Rao smiles. He has very good, very white teeth. "Strange as it may seem, I'm not sure what the etiquette is in this sort of thing. I came here because I wanted to tell you that I am one of your greatest fans and that I am very much looking forward to your performance tonight. It's the highlight of this conference, for me."

The light is almost gone now and the sky a pure, deep, eternal blue, like a minor chord. Houseboys make their many ways along the ramps and wall-walks lighting rows of tiny oil-lamps. The Red Fort glitters like a constellation fallen over Old Delhi. Esha has lived in Delhi all her twenty-years and she has never seen her city from this vantage. She says, "I'm not sure what the etiquette is either. I've never spoken with an aeai before."

"Really?" A.J. now stands with his back against the sun-warm stone, looking up at the sky, and at her out of the corner of his eye. The eyes smile, slyly. *Of course*, she thinks. Her city is as full of aeais as it is with birds. From computer systems and robots with the feral smarts of rats and pigeons to entities like this one standing before her on the gate of the Red Fort making charming compliments. Not standing. Not anywhere, just a pattern of information in her head. She stammers, "I mean, a . . . a . . ."

"Level 2.9?"

"I don't know what that means."

The aeai smiles and as she tries to work it out there is another chime in Esha's head and this time it is Pranh, swearing horribly as usual, *where is she doesn't she know yts got a show to put on, half the bloody continent watching.*

"Excuse me . . ."

"Of course. I shall be watching."

How? she wants to ask. *An aeai, a djinn, wants to watch me dance. What is this?* But when she looks back all there is to ask is a wisp of dust blowing along the lantern-lit battlement.

There are elephants and circus performers, there are illusionists and table magicians, there are *ghazal* and *qawali* and *Boli* singers; there is the catering and the *sommelier's* wine and then the lights go up on the stage and Esha spins out past the scowling Pranh as the *tabla* and melodeon and *shehnai* begin. The heat is intense in the marble square, but she is transported. The stampings, the pirouettes and swirl of her skirts, the beat of the ankle bells, the facial expressions, the subtle hand *mudras*: once again she is spun out of herself by the disciplines of *Kathak* into something greater. She would call it her art, her talent, but she's superstitious: that would be to claim it and so crush the gift. Never name it, never speak it. Just let it possess you. Her own, burning djinn. But as she spins across the brilliant stage before the seated delegates, a corner of her perception scans the architecture for cameras, robots, eyes through which A.J. Rao might watch her. Is she a splinter of his consciousness, as he is a splinter of hers?

She barely hears the applause as she curtseys to the bright lights and runs off stage. In the dressing room, as her assistants remove and carefully fold the many jeweled layers of her costume, wipe away the crusted stage make up to reveal the twenty-two-year-old beneath, her attention keeps flicking to her earhoek, curled like a plastic question on her dressing table. In jeans and silk sleeveless vest, indistinguishable from any other of Delhi's four million twentysomethings, she coils the device behind her ear, smooths her hair over it and her fingers linger a moment as she slides the palmer over her hand. No calls. No messages. No avatars. She's surprised it matters so much.

The official Mercs are lined up in the Delhi Gate. A man and woman intercept her on her way to the car. She waves them away.

"I don't do autographs. . . ." Never after a performance. Get out, get away quick and quiet, disappear into the city. The man opens his palm to show her a warrant badge.

"We'll take this car."

It pulls out from the line and cuts in, a cream-colored high-marque Maruti. The man politely opens the door to let her enter first, but there is no respect in it. The woman takes the front seat beside the driver; he accelerates out, horn blaring, into the great circus of night traffic around the Red Fort. The airco purrs.

"I am Inspector Thacker from the Department of Artificial Intelligence Registration and Licensing," the man says. He is young and good-skinned and confident and not at all fazed by sitting next to a celebrity. His after-shave is perhaps over-emphatic.

"A Krishna Cop."

That makes him wince.

"Our surveillance systems have flagged up a communication between you and the Bharati Level 2.9 aeai A.J. Rao."

"He called me, yes."

"At 21:08. You were in contact for six minutes twenty-two seconds. Can you tell me what you talked about?"

The car is driving very fast for Delhi. The traffic seems to flow around from it. Every light seems to be green. Nothing is allowed to impede its progress. *Can they do that?* Esha wonders. *Krishna Cops, aeai police: can they tame the creatures they hunt?*

"We talked about *Kathak*. He's a fan. Is there a problem? Have I done something wrong?"

"No, nothing at all, Ms. But you do understand, with a conference of this importance . . . on behalf of the Department, I apologize for the unseemliness. Ah. Here we are."

They've brought her right to her bungalow. Feeling dirty, dusty, confused she watches the Krishna Cop car drive off, holding Delhi's frenetic traffic at bay with its tame djinns. She pauses at the gate. She needs, she deserves, a moment to come out from the performance, that little step way so you can turn round and look back at yourself and say, yeah, Esha Rathore. The bungalow is unlit, quiet. Neeta and Priya will be out with their wonderful fiancés, talking wedding gifts and guest lists and how hefty a dowry they can squeeze from their husbands-to-be's families. They're not her sisters, though they share the classy bungalow. No one has sisters any more in Awadh, or even Bharat. No one of Esha's age, though she's heard the balance is being restored. Daughters are fashionable. Once upon a time, women paid the dowry.

She breathes deep of her city. The cool garden microclimate presses down the roar of Delhi to a muffled throb, like blood in the heart. She can smell dust and roses. Rose of Persia. Flower of the Urdu poets. And dust. She imagines it rising up on a whisper of wind, spinning into a charming, dangerous djinn. No. An illusion, a madness of a mad old city. She opens the security gate and finds every square centimeter of the compound filled with red roses.

Neeta and Priya are waiting for her at the breakfast table next morning, sitting side-by-side close like an interview panel. Or Krishna Cops. For once they aren't talking houses and husbands.

"Who who who where did they come from who sent them so many must have cost a fortune. . . ."

Puri the housemaid brings Chinese green chai that's good against cancer. The sweeper has gathered the bouquets into a pile at one end of the compound. The sweetness of their perfume is already tinged with rot.

"He's a diplomat." Neeta and Priya only watch *Town and Country* and the *chati* channels but even they must know the name of A.J. Rao. So she half lies: "A Bharati diplomat."

Their mouths go *Oooh*, then *ah* as they look at each other. Neeta says, "You have have have to bring him."

"To our *darbar*," says Priya.

"Yes, our *darbar*," says Neeta. They've talked gossiped planned little else for the past two months: their grand joint engagement party where they show off to their as-yet-unmarried girl friends and make all the single men jealous. Esha excuses her grimace with the bitterness of the health-tea.

"He's very busy." She doesn't say *busy man*. She cannot even think why she is playing these silly *girli* secrecy games. An *aeai* called her at the Red Fort to tell her it admired her. Didn't even meet her. There was nothing to meet. It was all in her head. "I don't even know how to get in touch with him. They don't give their numbers out."

"He's coming," Neeta and Priya insist.

She can hardly hear the music for the rattle of the old airco but sweat runs down her sides along the waistband of her Adidas tights to gather in the hollow of her back and slide between the taut curves of her ass. She tries it again across the *gharana's* practice floor. Even the ankle bells sound like lead. Last night she touched the three heavens. This morning she feels dead. She can't concentrate, and that little *lavda* Pranh knows it, swishing at her with yts cane and gobbing out wads of chewed *paan* and mealy eunuch curses.

"Ey! Less staring at your palmer, more *mudras*! Decent *mudras*. You jerk my dick, if I still had one."

Embarrassed that Pranh has noted something she was not conscious of herself—*ring, call me, ring call me, ring, take me out of this*—she fires back, "If you ever had one."

Pranh slashes yts cane at her legs, catches the back of her calf a sting.

"Fuck you, *hijra*!" Esha snatches up towel bag palmer, hooks the ear-piece behind her long straight hair. No point changing, the heat out there will soak through anything in a moment. "I'm out of here."

Pranh doesn't call after her. Yts too proud. *Little freak monkey thing*, she thinks. *How is it a nute is an yt, but an incorporeal aeai is a he?* In the legends of Old Delhi, *djinns* are always he.

"*Memsahb* Rathore?"

The chauffeur is in full dress and boots. His only concession to the heat is his shades. In bra top and tights and bare skin, she's melting. "The vehicle is fully air-conditioned, *memsahb*."

The white leather upholstery is so cool her flesh recoils from its skin.

"This isn't the Krishna Cops."

"No *memsahb*." The chauffeur pulls out into the traffic. It's only as the security locks clunk she thinks *Oh Lord Krishna, they could be kidnapping me*.

"Who sent you?" There's glass too thick for her fists between her and the driver. Even if the doors weren't locked, a tumble from the car at this speed, in this traffic, would be too much for even a dancer's lithe reflexes. And she's lived in Delhi all her life, *basti* to bungalow, but she doesn't recognize these streets, this suburb, that industrial park. "Where are you taking me?"

"*Memsahb*, where I am not permitted to say for that would spoil the surprise. But I am permitted to tell you that you are the guest of A.J. Rao."

The palmer calls her name as she finishes freshening up with bottled Kinley from the car-bar.

"Hello!" (kicking back deep into the cool cool white leather, like a *filmi* star. She is a star. A star with a bar in a car.)

Audio-only. "I trust the car is acceptable?" Same smooth-suave voice. She can't imagine any opponent being able to resist that voice in negotiation.

"It's wonderful. Very luxurious. Very high status." She's out in the *bastis* now, slums deeper and meaner than the one she grew up in. Newer. The newest ones always look the oldest. Boys chug past on a home-brew *chhakda* they've scavenged from tractor parts. The cream Lex carefully detours around emaciated cattle with angular hips jutting through stretched skin like engineering. Everywhere, drought dust lies thick on the crazed hardtop. This is a city of stares. "Aren't you supposed to be at the conference?"

A laugh, inside her auditory center.

"Oh, I am hard at work winning water for Bharat, believe me. I am nothing if not an assiduous civil servant."

"You're telling me you're there, and here?"

"Oh, it's nothing for us to be in more than one place at the same time. There are multiple copies of me, and subroutines."

"So which is the real you?"

"They are all the real me. In fact, not one of my avatars is in Delhi at all, I am distributed over a series of *dharma*-cores across Varanasi and Patna." He sighs. It sounds close and weary and warm as a whisper in her ear. "You find it difficult to comprehend a distributed consciousness; it is every bit as hard for me to comprehend a discrete, mobile consciousness. I can only copy myself through what you call cyberspace, which is the physical reality of my universe, but you move through dimensional space and time."

"So which one of you loves me then?" The words are out, wild, loose, and unconsidered. "I mean, as a dancer, that is." She's filling, gabbling. "Is there one of you that particularly appreciates *Kathak*?" Polite polite words, like you'd say to an industrialist or a hopeful lawyer at one of Nee-ta and Priya's hideous match-making soirees. *Don't be forward, no one likes a forward woman. This is a man's world, now.* But she hears glee bubble in A.J. Rao's voice.

"Why, all of me and every part of me, Esha."

Her name. He used her name.

It's a shitty street of pie-dogs and men lounging on *charpoy*s scratching themselves, but the chauffeur insists, *here, this way memsahb*. She picks her way down a *gali* lined with unsteady minarets of old car tires. Burning *ghee* and stale urine reek the air. Kids mob the Lexus but the car has A.J. Rao levels of security. The chauffeur pushes open an old wood and brass Mughal style gate in a crumbling red wall. "*Memsahb*."

She steps through into a garden. Into the ruins of a garden. The gasp of wonder dies. The geometrical water channels of the *charbagh* are dry, cracked, choked with litter from picnics. The shrubs are blousy and overgrown, the plant borders ragged with weeds. The grass is scabbed brown with drought-burn: the lower branches of the trees have been hacked away for firewood. As she walks toward the crack-roofed pavilion at the

center where paths and water channels meet, the gravel beneath her thin shoes is crazed into rivulets from past monsoons. Dead leaves and fallen twigs cover the lawns. The fountains are dry and silted. Yet families stroll pushing baby buggies; children chase balls. Old Islamic gentlemen read the papers and play chess.

"The Shalimar Gardens," says A.J. Rao in the base of her skull. "Paradise as a walled garden."

And as he speaks, a wave of transformation breaks across the garden, sweeping away the decay of the twenty-first century. Trees break into full leaf, flower beds blossom, rows of terracotta geranium pots march down the banks of the *charbagh* channels which shiver with water. The tiered roofs of the pavilion gleam with gold leaf, peacocks fluster and fuss their vanities, and everything glitters and splashes with fountain play. The laughing families are swept back into Mughal grandees, the old men in the park transformed into *malis* sweeping the gravel paths with their besoms.

Esha claps her hands in joy, hearing a distant, silver spray of sitar notes. "Oh," she says, numb with wonder. "Oh!"

"A thank you, for what you gave me last night. This is one of my favorite places in all India, even though it's almost forgotten. Perhaps, because it is almost forgotten. Aurangzeb was crowned Mughal Emperor here in 1658, now it's an evening stroll for the *basti* people. The past is a passion of mine; it's easy for me, for all of us. We can live in as many times as we can places. I often come here, in my mind. Or should I say, it comes to me."

Then the jets from the fountain ripple as if in the wind, but it is not the wind, not on this stifling afternoon, and the falling water flows into the shape of a man, walking out of the spray. A man of water, that shimmers and flows and becomes a man of flesh. A.J. Rao. No, she thinks, *never flesh*. A djinn. *A thing caught between heaven and hell. A caprice, a trickster. Then trick me.*

"It is as the old Urdu poets declare," says A.J. Rao. "Paradise is indeed contained within a wall."

It is far past four but she can't sleep. She lies naked—shameless—but for the hoek behind her ear on top of her bed with the window slats open and the ancient airco chugging, fitful in the periodic brownouts. It is the worst night yet. The city gasps for air. Even the traffic sounds beaten tonight. Across the room her palmer opens its blue eye and whispers her name. *Esha*.

She's up, kneeling on the bed, hand to hoek, sweat beading her bare skin.

"I'm here." A whisper. Neeta and Priya are a thin wall away on either side.

"It's late, I know, I'm sorry . . ."

She looks across the room into the palmer's camera.

"It's all right, I wasn't asleep." A tone in that voice. "What is it?"

"The mission is a failure."

She kneels in the center of the big antique bed. Sweat runs down the fold of her spine.

"The conference? What? What happened?" She whispers, he speaks in her head.

"It fell over one point. One tiny, trivial point, but it was like a wedge that split everything apart until it all collapsed. The Awadhis will build their dam at Kunda Khadar and they will keep their holy Ganga water for Awadh. My delegation is already packing. We will return to Varanasi in the morning."

Her heart kicks. Then she curses herself, *stupid, romantic giri*. He is already in Varanasi as much as he is here as much as he is at the Red Fort assisting his human superiors.

"I'm sorry."

"Yes," he says. "That is the feeling. Was I overconfident in my abilities?"

"People will always disappoint you."

A wry laugh in the dark of her skull.

"How very . . . disembodied of you, Esha." Her name seems to hang in the hot air, like a chord. "Will you dance for me?"

"What, here? Now?"

"Yes. I need something . . . embodied. Physical. I need to see a body move, a consciousness dance through space and time as I cannot. I need to see something beautiful."

Need. A creature with the powers of a god, *needs*. But Esha's suddenly shy, covering her small, taut breasts with her hands.

"Music. . ." she stammers. "I can't perform without music . . ." The shadows at the end of the bedroom thicken into an ensemble: three men bent over *tabla*, *sarangi* and *bansuri*. Esha gives a little shriek and ducks back to the modesty of her bedcover. *They cannot see you, they don't even exist, except in your head. And even if they were flesh, they would be so intent on their contraptions of wire and skin they would not notice.* Terrible driven things, musicians.

"I've incorporated a copy of a sub-aeai into myself for this night," A.J. Rao says. "A level 1.9 composition system. I supply the visuals."

"You can swap bits of yourself in and out?" Esha asks. The *tabla* player has started a slow *Natetere* tap-beat on the *dayan* drum. The musicians nod at each other. Counting, they will be counting. It's hard to convince herself Neeta and Priya can't hear; no one can hear but her. And A.J. Rao. The *sarangi* player sets his bow to the strings, the *bansuri* lets loose a snake of fluting notes. A *sangeet*, but not one she has ever heard before.

"It's making it up!"

"It's a composition aeai. Do you recognize the sources?"

"Krishna and the *gopis*." One of the classic *Kathak* themes: Krishna's seduction of the milkmaids with his flute, the *bansuri*, most sensual of instruments. She knows the steps, feels her body anticipating the moves.

"Will you dance, lady?"

And she steps with the potent grace of a tiger from the bed onto the grass matting of her bedroom floor, into the focus of the palmer. Before she had been shy, silly, *giri*. Not now. She has never had an audience like this before. A lordly djinn. In pure, hot silence she executes the turns and stampings and bows of the *One Hundred and Eight Gopis*, bare feet kissing the woven grass. Her hands shape *mudras*, her face the expressions of the ancient story: surprise, coyness, intrigue, arousal. Sweat courses luxuriously down her naked skin: she doesn't feel it. She is clothed in

movement and night. Time slows, the stars halt in their arc over great Delhi. She can feel the planet breathe beneath her feet. This is what it was for, all those dawn risings, all those bleeding feet, those slashes of Pranh's cane, those lost birthdays, that stolen childhood. She dances until her feet bleed again into the rough weave of the matting, until every last drop of water is sucked from her and turned into salt, but she stays with the *tabla*, the beat of *dayan* and *bayan*. She is the milkmaid by the river, seduced by a god. A.J. Rao did not choose this *Kathak* wantonly. And then the music comes to its ringing end and the musicians bow to each other and disperse into golden dust and she collapses, exhausted as never before from any other performance, onto the end of her bed.

Light wakes her. She is sticky, naked, embarrassed. The house staff could find her. And she's got a killing headache. Water. Water. Joints nerves sinews plead for it. She pulls on a Chinese silk robe. On her way to the kitchen, the voyeur eye of her palmer blinks at her. No erotic dream then, no sweat hallucination stirred out of heat and hydrocarbons. She danced Krishna and the one hundred and eight gopis in her bedroom for an aeai. A message. There's a number. *You can call me.*

Throughout the history of the eight Delhis there have been men—and almost always men—skilled in the lore of djinns. They are wise to their many forms and can see beneath the disguises they wear on the streets—donkey, monkey, dog, scavenging kite—to their true selves. They know their roosts and places where they congregate—they are particularly drawn to mosques—and know that that unexplained heat as you push down a *gali* behind the Jama Masjid is djinns, packed so tight you can feel their fire as you move through them. The wisest—the strongest—of fakirs know their names and so can capture and command them. Even in the old India, before the break up into Awadh and Bharat and Rajputana and the United States of Bengal—there were saints who could summon djinns to fly them on their backs from one end of Hindustan to the other in a night. In my own Leh there was an aged aged sufi who cast one hundred and eight djinns out of a troubled house: twenty-seven in the living room, twenty-seven in the bedroom and fifty-four in the kitchen. With so many djinns there was no room for anyone else. He drove them off with burning yoghurt and chilies, but warned: *do not toy with djinns, for they do nothing without a price, and though that may be years in the asking, ask it they surely will.*

Now there is a new race jostling for space in their city: the aeais. If the *djinni* are the creation of fire and men of clay, these are the creation of word. Fifty million of them swarm Delhi's boulevards and *chowks*: routing traffic, trading shares, maintaining power and water, answering inquiries, telling fortunes, managing calendars and diaries, handling routine legal and medical matters, performing in soap operas, sifting the septillion pieces of information streaming through Delhi's nervous system each second. The city is a great mantra. From routers and maintenance robots with little more than animal intelligence (each animal has intelligence enough: ask the eagle or the tiger) to the great Level 2.9s that are indistinguishable from a human being 99.99 percent of the time, they

are a young race, an energetic race, fresh to this world and enthusiastic, understanding little of their power.

The djinns watch in dismay from their rooftops and minarets: that such powerful creatures of living word should so blindly serve the clay creation, but mostly because, unlike humans, they can foresee the time when the aeais will drive them from their ancient, beloved city and take their places.

This *darbar*, Neeta and Priya's theme is *Town and Country*: the Bharati mega-soap that has perversely become fashionable as public sentiment in Awadh turns against Bharat. Well, we will just bloody well build our dam, tanks or no tanks; they can beg for it, it's our water now, and, in the same breath, what do you think about Ved Prakash, isn't it scandalous what that Ritu Parvaaz is up to? Once they derided it and its viewers but now that it's improper, now that it's unpatriotic, they can't get enough of Anita Mahapatra and the Begum Vora. Some still refuse to watch but pay for daily plot digests so they can appear fashionably informed at social musts like Neeta and Priya's dating *darbars*.

And it's a grand *darbar*; the last before the monsoon—if it actually happens this year. Neeta and Priya have hired top *bhati*-boys to provide a wash of mixes beamed straight into the guests' hoeks. There's even a climate control field, laboring at the limits of its containment to hold back the night heat. Esha can feel its ultrasonics as a dull buzz against her molars.

"Personally, I think sweat becomes you," says A.J. Rao, reading Esha's vital signs through her palmer. Invisible to all but Esha, he moves beside her like death through the press of Town and Countrified guests. By tradition the last *darbar* of the season is a masked ball. In modern, middle-class Delhi that means everyone wears the computer-generated semblance of a soap character. In the flesh they are the socially mobile, dressed in smart-but-cool hot season modes, but, in the mind's eye, they are Aparna Chawla and Ajay Nadiadwala, dashing Govind and conniving Dr. Chatterji. There are three Ved Prakashes and as many Lal Darfans—the aeai actor that plays Ved Prakash in the machine-made soap. Even the grounds of Neeta's fiancé's suburban bungalow have been enchanted into Brahmpur, the fictional Town where *Town and Country* takes place, where the actors that play the characters believe they live out their lives of celebrity tittle-tattle. When Neeta and Priya judge that everyone has mingled and networked enough, the word will be given and everyone will switch off their glittering disguises and return to being wholesalers and lunch vendors and software rajahs. Then the serious stuff begins, the matter of finding a bride. For now Esha can enjoy wandering anonymous in company of her friendly djinn.

She has been wandering much these weeks, through heat streets to ancient places, seeing her city fresh through the eyes of a creature that lives across many spaces and times. At the Sikh *gurdwara* she saw Tegh Bahadur, the Ninth Guru, beheaded by fundamentalist Aurangzeb's guards. The gyring traffic around Vijay Chowk melted into the Bentley cavalcade of Mountbatten, the Last Viceroy, as he forever quit Lutyen's stupendous palace. The tourist clutter and shoving curio vendors around the Qutb Minar turned to ghosts and it was 1193 and the *muezzins* of the first

Mughal conquerors sang out the *adhaan*. Illusions. Little lies. But it is all right, when it is done in love. Everything is all right in love. *Can you read my mind?* she asked as she moved with her invisible guide through the thronging streets, that every day grew less raucous, less substantial. *Do you know what I am thinking about you, Aesai Rao?* Little by little, she slips away from the human world into the city of the djinns.

Sensation at the gate. The male stars of *Town and Country* buzz around a woman in an ivory sequined dress. It's a bit damn clever: she's come as Yana Mitra, freshest fittest fastest *boli* sing-star. And *boli* girls, like *Kathak* dancers, are still meat and ego, though Yana, like every Item-singer, has had her computer avatar guest on T'n'C.

A.J. Rao laughs. "If they only knew. Very clever. What better disguise than to go as yourself. It really is Yana Mitra. Esha Rathore, what's the matter, where are you going?"

Why do you have to ask don't you know everything then you know it's hot and noisy and the ultrasonics are doing my head and the yap yap yap is going right through me and they're all only after one thing, are you married are you engaged are you looking and I wish I hadn't come I wish I'd just gone out somewhere with you and that dark corner under the gulmo-har bushes by the bhati-rig looks the place to get away from all the stupid stupid people.

Neeta and Priya, who know her disguise, shout over, "So Esha, are we finally going to meet that man of yours?"

He's already waiting for her among the golden blossoms. Djinns travel at the speed of thought.

"What is it what's the matter. . . ?"

She whispers, "You know sometimes I wish, I really wish you could get me a drink."

"Why certainly, I will summon a waiter."

"No!" Too loud. Can't be seen talking to the bushes. "No; I mean, hand me one. Just hand me one." But he cannot, and never will. She says, "I started when I was five, did you know that? Oh, you probably did, you know everything about me. But I bet you didn't know how it happened: I was playing with the other girls, dancing round the tank, when this old woman from the *gharana* went up to my mother and said, I will give you a hundred thousand rupees if you give her to me. I will turn her into a dancer; maybe, if she applies herself, a dancer famous through all of India. And my mother said, why her? And do you know what that woman said? Because she shows rudimentary talent for movement, but, mostly, because you are willing to sell her to me for one *lakh* rupees. She took the money there and then, my mother. The old woman took me to the *gharana*. She had once been a great dancer but she got rheumatism and couldn't move and that made her bad. She used to beat me with *lathis*, I had to be up before dawn to get everyone *chai* and eggs. She would make me practice until my feet bled. They would hold up my arms in slings to perform the *mudras* until I couldn't put them down again without screaming. I never once got home—and do you know something? I never once wanted to. And despite her, I applied myself, and I became a great dancer. And do you know what? No one cares. I spent seventeen years

mastering something no one cares about. But bring in some *boli* girl who's been around five minutes to flash her teeth and tits. . . ."

"Jealous?" asks A.J.-Rao, mildly scolding.

"Don't I deserve to be?"

Then *bhati*-boy One blinks up "You Are My Soniya" on his palmer and that's the signal to demask. Yane Mitra claps her hands in delight and sings along as all around her glimmering *soapi* stars dissolve into mundane accountants and engineers and cosmetic nano-surgeons and the pink walls and roof gardens and thousand thousands stars of Old Brahm-pur melt and run down the sky.

It's seeing them, exposed in their naked need, melting like that soap-world before the sun of *celebrity*, that calls back the madness Esha knows from her childhood in the *gharana*. The brooch makes a piercing, ringing chime against the cocktail glass she has snatched from a waiter. She climbs up on to a table. At last, that *boli* bitch shuts up. All eyes are on her.

"Ladies, but mostly gentlemen, I have an announcement to make." Even the city behind the sound-curtain seems to be holding its breath. "I am engaged to be married!" Gasps. Oohs. Polite applause *who is she, is she on tivi, isn't she something arty?* Neeta and Priya are wide-eyed at the back. "I'm very very lucky because my husband-to-be is here tonight. In fact, he's been with me all evening. Oh, silly me. Of course, I forgot, not all of you can see him. Darling, would you mind? Gentlemen and ladies, would you mind slipping on your hoeks for just a moment. I'm sure you don't need any introduction to my wonderful wonderful fiancé, A.J. Rao."

And she knows from the eyes, the mouths, the low murmur that threatens to break into applause, then fails, then is taken up by Neeta and Priya to turn into a decorous ovation, that they can all see Rao as tall and elegant and handsome as she sees him, at her side, hand draped over hers.

She can't see that *boli* girl anywhere.

He's been quiet all the way back in the *phatphat*. He's quiet now, in the house. They're alone. Neeta and Priya should have been home hours ago, but Esha knows they're scared of her.

"You're very quiet." This, to the coil of cigarette smoke rising up toward the ceiling fan as she lies on her bed. She'd love a *bidi*; a good, dirty street smoke for once, not some Big Name Western brand.

"We were followed as we drove back after the party. An aeai aircraft surveilled your *phatphat*. A network analysis aeai system sniffed at my router net to try to track this com channel. I know for certain street cameras were tasked on us. The Krishna Cop who lifted you after the Red Fort *darbar* was at the end of the street. He is not very good at subterfuge."

Esha goes to the window to spy out the Krishna Cop, call him out, demand of him what he thinks he's doing?

"He's long gone," says Rao. "They have been keeping you under light surveillance for some time now. I would imagine your announcement has upped your level."

"They were there?"

"As I said . . ."

"Light surveillance."

It's scary but exciting, down in the deep *muladhara chakra*, a red throb above her *yonis*. Scarysexy. That same lift of red madness that made her blurt out that marriage announcement. It's all going so far, so fast. No way to get off now.

"You never gave me the chance to answer," says aeai Rao.

Can you read my mind? Esha thinks at the palmer.

"No, but I share some operating protocols with scripting aeais for *Town and Country*—in a sense they are a low-order part of me—they have become quite good predictors of human behavior."

"I'm a soap opera."

Then she falls back onto the bed and laughs and laughs and laughs until she feels sick, until she doesn't want to laugh any more and every guffaw is a choke, a lie, spat up at the spy machines up there, beyond the lazy fan that merely stirs the heat, turning on the huge thermals that spire up from Delhi's colossal heat-island, a conspiracy of djinns.

"Esha," A.J. Rao says, closer than he has ever seemed before. "Lie still." She forms the question *why?* And hears the corresponding whisper inside her head *hush, don't speak*. In the same instant the *chakra* glow bursts like a yolk and leaks heat into her *yonis*. *Oh*, she says, *oh!* Her clitoris is singing to her. *Oh oh oh oh*. "How. . . ?" Again, the voice, huge inside her head, inside every part of her *sssshhhhhh*. Building building she needs to do something, she needs to move needs to rub against the day-warmed scented wood of the big bed, needs to get her hand down there hard hard hard . . .

"No, don't touch," chides A.J. Rao and now she can't even move she needs to explode she has to explode her skull can't contain this her dancer's muscles are pulled tight as wires she can't take much more *no no no yes yes yes* she's shrieking now tiny little shrieks beating her fists off the bed but it's just spasm, nothing will obey her and then it's explosion bam, and another one before that one has even faded, huge slow explosions across the sky and she's cursing and blessing every god in India. Ebbing now, but still shock after shock, one on top of the other. Ebbing now . . . Ebbing.

"Ooh. Oh. What? Oh wow, how?"

"The machine you wear behind your ear can reach deeper than words and visions," says A.J. Rao. "So, are you answered?"

"What?" The bed is drenched in sweat. She's sticky dirty needs to wash, change clothes, move but the afterglows are still fading. Beautiful beautiful colors.

"The question you never gave me the chance to answer. Yes. I will marry you."

"Stupid vain girl, you don't even know what caste he is."

Mata Madhuri smokes eighty a day through a plastic tube hooked from the respirator unit into a grommet in her throat. She burns through them three at a time: *bloody machine scrubs all the good out of them*, she says. *Last bloody pleasure I have*. She used to bribe the nurses but they bring her them free now, out of fear of her temper that grows increasingly vile as her body surrenders more and more to the machines.

Without pause for Esha's reply, a flick of her whim whips the life-support chair round and out into the garden.

"Can't smoke in there, no fresh air."

Esha follows her out on to the raked gravel of the formal *charbagh*.

"No one marries in caste any more."

"Don't be smart, stupid girl. It's like marrying a Muslim, or even a Christian, Lord Krishna protect me. You know fine what I mean. Not a real person."

"There are girls younger than me marry trees, or even dogs."

"So bloody clever. That's up in some god-awful shithole like Bihar or Rajputana, and anyway, those are gods. Any fool knows that. Ach, away with you!" The old, destroyed woman curses as the chair's aeai deploys its parasol. "Sun sun, I need sun, I'll be burning soon enough, sandalwood, you hear? You burn me on a sandalwood pyre. I'll know if you stint."

Madhuri the old crippled dance teacher always uses this tactic to kill a conversation with which she is uncomfortable. *When I'm gone . . . Burn me sweetly . . .*

"And what can a god do that A.J. Rao can't?"

"Ai! You ungrateful, blaspheming child. I'm not hearing this la la la la la la la have you finished yet?"

Once a week Esha comes to the nursing home to visit this ruin of a woman, wrecked by the demands a dancer makes of a human body. She's explored guilt need rage resentment anger pleasure at watching her collapse into long death as the motives that keep her turning up the drive in a *phatphat* and there is only one she believes. She's the only mother she has.

"If you marry that . . . thing . . . you will be making a mistake that will destroy your life," Madhuri declares, accelerating down the path between the water channels.

"I don't need your permission," Esha calls after her. A thought spins Madhuri's chair on its axis.

"Oh, really? That would be a first for you. You want my blessing. Well, you won't have it. I refuse to be party to such nonsense."

"I will marry A.J. Rao"

"What did you say?"

"I. Will. Marry. Aeai. A.J. Rao."

Madhuri laughs, a dry, dying, spitting sound, full of *bidi*-smoke.

"Well, you almost surprise me. Defiance. Good, some spirit at last. That was always your problem, you always needed everyone to approve, everyone to give you permission, everyone to love you. And that's what stopped you being great, do you know that, girl? You could have been a *devi*, but you always held back for fear that someone might not approve. And so you were only ever . . . good."

People are looking now, staff, visitors. Patients. Raised voices, unseemly emotions. This is a house of calm, and slow mechanized dying. Esha bends low to whisper to her mentor.

"I want you to know that I dance for him. Every night. Like Radha for Krishna. I dance just for him, and then he comes and makes love to me. He makes me scream and swear like a hooker. Every night. And look!" He

doesn't need to call any more; he is hardwired into the hook she now hardly ever takes off. Esha looks up: he is there, standing in a sober black suit among the strolling visitors and droning wheelchairs, hands folded. "There he is, see? My lover, my husband."

A long, keening screech, like feedback, like a machine dying. Madhuri's withered hands fly to her face. Her breathing tube curdles with tobacco smoke.

"Monster! Monster! Unnatural child, ah, I should have left you in that *basti*! Away from me away away away!"

Esha retreats from the old woman's mad fury as hospital staff come hurrying across the scorched lawns, white saris flapping.

Every fairytale must have a wedding.

Of course, it was the event of the season. The decrepit old Shalimar Gardens were transformed by an army of *malis* into a sweet, green, watered maharajah's fantasia with elephants, pavilions, musicians, lancers, dancers, *filmi* stars, and robot bartenders. Neeta and Priya were uncomfortable bridesmaids in fabulous frocks; a great brahmin was employed to bless the union of woman and artificial intelligence. Every television network sent cameras, human or aeai. Gleaming presenters checked the guests in and checked the guests out. *Chati* mag paparazzi came in their crowds, wondering what they could turn their cameras on. There were even politicians from Bharat, despite the souring relationships between the two neighbors now Awadh constructors were scooping up the Ganga sands into revetments. But most there were the people of the encroaching *bastis*, jostling up against the security staff lining the paths of their garden, asking, *she's marrying a what? How does that work? Can they, you know? And what about children? Who is she, actually? Can you see anything? I can't see anything. Is there anything to see?*

But the guests and the great were 'hooked up and applauded the groom in his golden veil on his white stallion, stepping with the delicacy of a dressage horse up the raked paths. And because they were great and guests, there was not one who, despite the free French champagne from the well-known diplomatic *sommelier*, would ever say, *but there's no one there*. No one was at all surprised that, after the bride left in a stretch limo, there came a dry, sparse thunder, cloud to cloud, and a hot mean wind that swept the discarded invitations along the paths. As they were filing back to their taxis, tankers were draining the expensively filled *qanats*.

It made lead in the news.

Kathak stars weds aeai lover!!! Honeymoon in Kashmir!!!

Above the *chowks* and minarets of Delhi, the djinns bent together in conference.

He takes her while shopping in Tughluk Mall. Three weeks and the shop girls still nod and whisper. She likes that. She doesn't like it that they glance and giggle when the Krishna Cops lift her from the counter at the Black Lotus Japanese Import Company.

"My husband is an accredited diplomat, this is a diplomatic incident."

The woman in the bad suit pushes her head gently down to enter the car. The Ministry doesn't need personal liability claims.

"Yes, but you are not, Mrs. Rao," says Thacker in the back seat. Still wearing that cheap aftershave.

"Rathore," she says. "I have retained my stage name. And we shall see what my husband has to say about my diplomatic status." She lifts her hand in a *mudra* to speak to AyJay, as she thinks of him now. Dead air. She performs the wave again.

"This is a shielded car," Thacker says.

The building is shielded also. They take the car right inside, down a ramp into the basement parking lot. It's a cheap, anonymous glass and titanium block on Parliament Street that she's driven past ten thousand times on her way to the shops of Connaught Circus without ever noticing. Thacker's office is on the fifteenth floor. It's tidy and has a fine view over the astronomical geometries of the Jantar Mantar but smells of food: *tiffin* snatched at the desk. She checks for photographs of family children wife. Only himself smart in pressed whites for a cricket match.

"Chai?"

"Please." The anonymity of this civil service block is beginning to unnerve her: a city within a city. The *chai* is warm and sweet and comes in a tiny disposable plastic cup. Thacker's smile seems also warm and sweet. He sits at the end of the desk, angled toward her in Krishna-cop handbook "non-confrontational."

"Mrs. Rathore. How to say this?"

"My marriage is legal. . . ."

"Oh, I know, Mrs. Rathore. This is Awadh, after all. Why, there have even been women who married djinns, within our own lifetimes. No. It's an international affair now, it seems. Oh well. Water: we do all so take it for granted, don't we? Until it runs short, that is."

"Everybody knows my husband is still trying to negotiate a solution to the Kunda Khadar problem."

"Yes, of course he is." Thacker lifts a manila envelope from his desk, peeps inside, grimaces coyly. "How shall I put this? Mrs. Rathore, does your husband tell you everything about his work?"

"That is an impertinent question. . . ."

"Yes yes, forgive me, but if you'll look at these photographs."

Big glossy hi-res prints, slick and sweet smelling from the printer. Aerial views of the ground, a thread of green blue water, white sands, scattered shapes without meaning.

"This means nothing to me."

"I suppose it wouldn't, but these drone images show Bharati battle tanks, robot reconnaissance units, and air defense batteries deploying with striking distance of the construction at Kunda Khadar."

And it feels as if the floor has dissolved beneath her and she is falling through a void so vast it has no visible reference points, other than the sensation of her own falling.

"My husband and I don't discuss work."

"Of course. Oh, Mrs. Rathore, you've crushed your cup. Let me get you another one."

He leaves her much longer than it takes to get a shot of *chai* from the *wallah*. When he returns he asks casually, "Have you heard of a thing called the Hamilton Acts? I'm sorry, I thought in your position you would . . . but evidently not. Basically, it's a series of international treaties originated by the United States limiting the development and proliferation of high-level artificial intelligences, most specifically the hypothetical Generation Three. No? Did he not tell you any of this?"

Mrs. Rathore in her Italian suit folds her ankles one over the other and thinks, *this reasonable man can do anything he wants here, anything.*

"As you probably know, we grade and license aeais according to levels; these roughly correspond to how convincingly they pass as human beings. A Level 1 has basic animal intelligence, enough for its task but would never be mistaken for a human. Many of them can't even speak. They don't need to. A Level 2.9 like your husband,"—he speeds over the word, like the wheel of a *shatabdi* express over the gap in a rail—"is humanlike to a 5 percentile. A Generation Three is indistinguishable in any circumstances from a human—in fact, their intelligences may be many millions of times ours, if there is any meaningful way of measuring that. Theoretically we could not even recognize such an intelligence, all we would see would be the Generation Three interface, so to speak. The Hamilton Acts simply seek to control technology that could give rise to a Generation Three aeai. Mrs. Rathore, we believe sincerely that the Generation Threes pose the greatest threat to our security—as a nation and as a species—that we have ever faced."

"And my husband?" Solid, comfortable word. Thacker's sincerity scares her.

"The government is preparing to sign the Hamilton Acts in return for loan guarantees to construct the Kunda Khadar dam. When the Act is passed—and it's in the current session of the Lok Sabha—everything under Level 2.8 will be subject to rigorous inspection and licensing, policed by us."

"And over Level 2.8?"

"Illegal, Mrs. Rathore. They will be aggressively erased."

Esha crosses and uncrosses her legs. She shifts on the chair. Thacker will wait forever for her response.

"What do you want me to do?"

"A.J. Rao is highly placed within the Bharati administration."

"You're asking me to spy . . . on an aeai."

From his face, she knows he expected her to say, *husband*.

"We have devices, taps. . . . They would be beneath the level of aeai Rao's consciousness. We can run them into your 'hoek. We are not all blundering plods in the Department. Go to the window, Mrs. Rathore."

Esha touches her fingers lightly to the climate-cooled glass, polarized dusk against the drought light. Outside the smog haze says *heat*. Then she cries and drops to her knees in fear. The sky is filled with gods, rank upon rank, tier upon tier, rising up above Delhi in a vast helix, huge as clouds, as countries, until at the apex the Trimurti, the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Siva look down like falling moons. It is her private Ra-

mayana, the titanic Vedic battle order of gods arrayed across the troposphere.

She feels Thacker's hand help her up.

"Forgive me, that was stupid, unprofessional. I was showing off. I wanted to impress you with the aeai systems we have at our disposal."

His hand lingers a moment more than *gentle*. And the gods go out, all at once.

She says, "Mr. Thacker, would you put a spy in my bedroom, in my bed, between me and my husband? That's what you're doing if you tap into the channels between me and AyJay."

Still, the hand is there as Thacker guides her to the chair, offers cool cool water.

"I only ask because I believe I am doing something for this country. I take pride in my job. In some things I have discretion, but not when it comes to the security of the nation. Do you understand?"

Esha twitches into dancer's composure, straightens her dress, checks her face.

"Then the least you can do is call me a car."

That evening she whirls to the *tabla* and *shehnai* across the day-warmed marble of a Jaipuri palace *Diwan-I-aam*, a flame among the twilight pillars. The audience is dark huddles on the marble, hardly daring even to breathe. Among the lawyers politicians journalists cricket stars moguls of industry are the managers who have converted this Rajput palace into a planetary class hotel, and any numbers of *chati* celebs. None so *chati*, so celebby, as Esha Rathore. Pranh can cherry-pick the bookings now. She's more than a nine-day, even a nine-week wonder. Esha knows that all her rapt watchers are 'hooked up, hoping for a ghost-glimpse of her *djinn*-husband dancing with her through the flame-shadowed pillars.

Afterward, as yt carries her armfuls of flowers back to her suite, Pranh says, "You know, I'm going to have to up my percentage."

"You wouldn't dare," Esha jokes. Then she sees the bare fear on the nute's face. It's only a wash, a shadow. But yt's afraid.

Neeta and Priya had moved out of the bungalow by the time she returned from Dal Lake. They've stopped answering her calls. It's seven weeks since she last went to see Madhuri.

Naked, she sprawls on the pillows in the filigree-light stone *jharoka*. She peers down from her covered balcony through the grille at the departing guests. See out, not see in. Like the shut-away women of the old *zenana*. Shut away from the world. Shut away from human flesh. She stands up, holds her body against the day-warmed stone; the press of her nipples, the rub of her pubis. *Can you see me smell me sense me know that I am here at all?*

And he's there. She does not need to see him now, just sense his electric prickle along the inside of her skull. He fades into vision sitting on the end of the low, ornate teak bed. *He could as easily materialize in mid-air in front of her balcony*, she thinks. But there are rules, and games, even for djinns.

"You seem distracted, heart." He's blind in this room—no camera eyes

observing her in her jeweled skin—but he observes her through a dozen senses, a myriad feedback loops through her 'hoek.

"I'm tired, I'm annoyed, I wasn't as good as I should have been."

"Yes, I thought that too. Was it anything to do with the Krishna Cops this afternoon?"

Esha's heart races. He can read her heartbeat. He can read her sweat, he can read the adrenaline and noradrenalin balance in her brain. He will know if she lies. Hide a lie inside a truth.

"I should have said, I was embarrassed." He can't understand shame. Strange, in a society where people die from want of honor. "We could be in trouble, there's something called the Hamilton Acts."

"I am aware of them." He laughs. He has this way now of doing it inside her head. He thinks she likes the intimacy, a truly private joke. She hates it. "All too aware of them."

"They wanted to warn me. Us."

"That was kind of them. And me a representative of a foreign government. So that's why they'd been keeping a watch on you, to make sure you are all right."

"They thought they might be able to use me to get information from you."

"Did they indeed?"

The night is so still she can hear the jingle of the elephant harnesses and the cries of the *mahouts* as they carry the last of the guests down the long processional drive to their waiting limos. In a distant kitchen a radio jabbers.

Now we will see how human you are. Call him out. At last A.J. Rao says, "Of course. I do love you." Then he looks into her face. "I have something for you."

The staff turn their faces away in embarrassment as they set the device on the white marble floor, back out of the room, eyes averted. What does she care? She is a star. A.J. Rao raises his hand and the lights slowly die. Pierced-brass lanterns send soft stars across the beautiful old *zenana* room. The device is the size and shape of a *phatphat* tire, chromed and plasticed, alien among the Mughal retro. As Esha floats over the marble toward it, the plain white surface bubbles and deliquesces into dust. Esha hesitates.

"Don't be afraid, look!" says A.J. Rao. The powder spurts up like steam from boiling rice, then pollen-bursts into a tiny dust-dervish, staggering across the surface of the disc. "Take the 'hoek off!" Rao cries delightedly from the bed. "Take it off." Twice she hesitates, three times he encourages. Esha slides the coil of plastic off the sweet-spot behind her ear and voice and man vanish like death. Then the pillar of glittering dust leaps head high, lashes like a tree in a monsoon and twists itself into the ghostly outline of a man. It flickers once, twice, and then A.J. Rao stands before her. A rattle like leaves a snake-rasp a rush of winds, and then the image says, "Esha." A whisper of dust. A thrill of ancient fear runs through her skin into her bones.

"What is this . . . what are you?"

The storm of dust parts into a smile.

"I-Dust. Micro-robots. Each is smaller than a grain of sand, but they manipulate static fields and light. They are my body. Touch me. This is real. This is me."

But she flinches away in the lantern-lit room. Rao frowns.

"Touch me. . . ."

She reaches out her hand toward his chest. Close, he is a creature of sand, a whirlwind permanently whipping around the shape of a man. Esha touches flesh to i-Dust. Her hand sinks into his body. Her cry turns to a startled giggle.

"It tickles. . . ."

"The static fields."

"What's inside?"

"Why don't you find out?"

"What, you mean?"

"It's the only intimacy I can offer. . . ." He sees her eyes widen under their kohled make-up. "I think you should hold your breath."

She does, but keeps her eyes open until the last moment, until the dust flecks like a dead *tivi* channel in her close focus. A.J. Rao's body feels like the most delicate Vaanasi silk scarf draped across her bare skin. She is inside him. She is inside the body of her husband, her lover. She dares to open her eyes. Rao's face is a hollow shell looking back at her from a perspective of millimeters. When she moves her lips, she can feel the dust-bots of his lips brushing against hers: an inverse kiss.

"My heart, my Radha," whispers the hollow mask of A.J. Rao. Somewhere Esha knows she should be screaming. But she cannot: she is somewhere no human has ever been before. And now the whirling streamers of i-Dust are stroking her hips, her belly, her thighs. Her breasts. Her nipples, her cheeks and neck, all the places she loves to feel a human touch, caressing her, driving her to her knees, following her as the mote-sized robots follow A.J. Rao's command, swallowing her with his body.

It's *Gupshup* followed by *Chandni Chati* and at twelve thirty a photo shoot—at the hotel, if you don't mind—for *FilmFare's* Saturday Special Center Spread—you don't mind if we send a robot, they can get places get angles we just can't get the meat-ware and could you dress up, like you did for the opening, maybe a move or two, in between the pillars in the Diwan, just like the gala opening, okay lovely lovely lovely well your husband can copy us a couple of avatars and our own aeais can paste him in people want to see you together, happy couple lovely couple, dancer risen from *basti*, international diplomat, marriage across worlds in every sense the romance of it all, so how did you meet what first attracted you what's it like be married to an aeai how do the other girls treat you do you, you know and what about children, I mean, of course a woman and an aeai but there are technologies these days geneline engineering like all the super-duper rich and their engineered children and you are a celebrity now how are you finding it, sudden rise to fame, in every *gupshup* column, worldwide *celebi* star everyone's talking all the rage and all the chat and all the parties and as Esha answers for the sixth time the same questions asked by the same gazelle-eyed *girli celebi* reporters *oh we are very happy*

wonderfully happy deliriously happy love is a wonderful wonderful thing and that's the thing about love, it can be for anything, anyone, even a human and an aeai, that's the purest form of love, spiritual love her mouth opening and closing yabba yabba yabba but her inner eye, her eye of Siva, looks inward, backward.

Her mouth, opening and closing.

Lying on the big Mughal sweet-wood bed, yellow morning light shattered through the *jharoka* screen, her bare skin good-pimpled in the cool of the airco. Dancing between worlds: sleep, wakefulness in the hotel bedroom, memory of the things he did to her limbic centers through the hours of the night that had her singing like a *bulbul*, the world of the djinns. Naked but for the 'hoek behind her ear. She had become like those people who couldn't afford the treatments and had to wear eyeglasses and learned to at once ignore and be conscious of the technology on their faces. Even when she did remove it—for performing; for, as now, the shower—she could still place A.J. Rao in the room, feel his physicality. In the big marble stroll-in shower in this VIP suite relishing the gush and rush of precious water (always the mark of a true *rani*) she knew AyJay was sitting on the carved chair by the balcony. So when she thumbed on the *tivi* panel (bathroom with *tivi*, *oooh*!) to distract her while she towed dry her hair, her first reaction was a double-take-look at the 'hoek on the sink-stand when she saw the press conference from Varanasi and Water Spokesman A.J. Rao explaining Bharat's necessary military exercises in the vicinity of the Kunda Khadar dam. She slipped on the 'hoek, glanced into the room. There, on the chair, as she felt. There, in the Bharat Sabha studio in Varanasi, talking to Bharti from the *Good Morning Awadh!* News.

Esha watched them both as she slowly, distractedly dried herself. She had felt glowing, sensual, divine. Now she was fleshy, self-conscious, stupid. The water on her skin, the air in the big room was cold cold cold.

"AyJay, is that really you?"

He frowned.

"That's a very strange question first thing in the morning. Especially after. . ."

She cut cold his smile.

"There's a *tivi* in the bathroom. You're on, doing an interview for the news. A live interview. So, are you really here?"

"*Cho chweet*, you know what I am, a distributed entity. I'm copying and deleting myself all over the place. I am wholly there, and I am wholly here."

Esha held the vast, powder-soft towel around her.

"Last night, when you were here, in the body, and afterward, when we were in the bed; were you here with me? Wholly here? Or was there a copy of you working on your press statement and another having a high level meeting and another drawing an emergency water supply plan and another talking to the Banglas in Dhaka?"

"My love, does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters!" She found tears, and something beyond; anger choking in her throat. "It matters to me. It matters to any woman. To any . . . human."

"Mrs. Rao, are you all right?"

"Rathore, my name is Rathore!" She hears herself snap at the silly little *chati-mag* junior. Esha gets up, draws up her full dancer's poise. "This interview is over."

"Mrs. Rathore Mrs. Rathore," the journo *girli* calls after her.

Glancing at her fractured image in the thousand mirrors of the Sheesh Mahal, Esha notices glittering dust in the shallow lines of her face.

A thousand stories tell of the willfulness and whim of djinns. But for every story of the *djinni*, there are a thousand tales of human passion and envy and the aeais, being a creation between, learned from both. Jealousy, and dissembling.

When Esha went to Thacker the Krishna Cop, she told herself it was from fear of what the Hamilton Acts might do to her husband in the name of national hygiene. But she dissembled. She went to that office on Parliament Street looking over the star-geometries of the Jantar Mantar out of jealousy. When a wife wants her husband, she must have all of him. Ten thousand stories tell this. A copy in the bedroom while another copy plays water politics is an unfaithfulness. If a wife does not have everything, she has nothing. So Esha went to Thacker's office wanting to betray and as she opened her hand on the desk and the *techi* boys loaded their darkware into her palmer she thought, *this is right, this is good, now we are equal*. And when Thacker asked her to meet him again in a week to update the 'ware—unlike the djinns, hostages of eternity, software entities on both sides of the war evolved at an ever-increasing rate—he told himself it was duty to his warrant, loyalty to his country. In this too he dissembled. It was fascination.

Earth-mover robots started clearing the Kunda Khadar dam site the day Inspector Thacker suggested that perhaps next week they might meet at the International Coffee House on Connaught Circus, his favorite. She said, *my husband will see*. To which Thacker replied, *we have ways to blind him*. But all the same she sat in the furthest, darkest corner, under the screen showing the international cricket, hidden from any prying eyes, her 'hoek shut down and cold in her handbag.

So what are you finding out? she asked.

It would be more than my job is worth to tell you, Mrs. Rathore, said the Krishna Cop. National security. Then the waiter brought coffee on a silver tray.

After that they never went back to the office. On the days of their meetings Thacker would whirl her through the city in his government car to Chandni Chowk, to Humayun's Tomb and the Qutb Minar, even to the Shalimar Gardens. Esha knew what he was doing, taking her to those same places where her husband had enchanted her. *How closely have you been watching me?* she thought. *Are you trying to seduce me?* For Thacker did not magic her away to the eight Delhis of the dead past, but immersed her in the crowd, the smell, the bustle, the voices and commerce and traffic and music; her present, her city burning with life and movement. *I was fading*, she realized. *Fading out of the world, becoming a ghost, locked in that invisible marriage, just the two of us, seen and un-*

seen, always together, only together. She would feel for the plastic fetus of her 'hoek coiled in the bottom of her jeweled bag and hate it a little. When she slipped it back behind her ear in the privacy of the *phatphat* back to her bungalow, she would remember that Thacker was always assiduous in thanking her for her help in national security. Her reply was always the same: *Never thank a woman for betraying her husband over her country.*

He would ask, of course. *Out and about*, she would say. *Sometimes I just need to get out of this place, get away. Yes, even from you. . . .* Holding the words, the look into the eye of the lens just long enough. . . .

Yes, of course, you must.

Now the earthmovers had turned Kunda Khadar into Asia's largest construction site, the negotiations entered a new stage. Varanasi was talking directly to Washington to put pressure on Awadh to abandon the dam and avoid a potentially destabilizing water war. US support was conditional on Bharat's agreement to the Hamilton protocols, which Bharat could never do, not with its major international revenue generator being the wholly aeai-generated *soapi Town and Country*.

Washington telling me to effectively sign my own death warrant, A.J. Rao would laugh. *Americans surely appreciate irony.* All this he told her as they sat on the well-tended lawn sipping green *chai* through a straw, Esha sweating freely in the swelter but unwilling to go into the air-conditioned cool because she knew there were still paparazzi lenses out there, focusing. AyJay never needed to sweat. But she still knew that he split himself. In the night, in the rare cool, he would ask, *dance for me*. But she didn't dance any more, not for aeai A.J. Rao, not for Pranh, not for a thrilled audience who would shower her with praise and flowers and money and fame. Not even for herself.

Tired. Too tired. The heat. Too tired.

Thacker is on edge, toying with his *chai* cup, wary of eye contact when they meet in his beloved International Coffee House. He takes her hand and draws the updates into her open palm with boyish coyness. His talk is smaller than small, finicky, itchily polite. Finally, he dares looks at her.

"Mrs. Rathore, I have something I must ask you. I have wanted to ask you for some time now."

Always, the name, the honorific. But the breath still freezes, her heart kicks in animal fear.

"You know you can ask me anything." Tastes like poison. Thacker can't hold her eye, ducks away, Killa Krishna Kop turned shy boy.

"Mrs. Rathore, I am wondering if you would like to come and see me play cricket?"

The Department of Artificial Intelligence Registration and Licensing versus Parks and Cemeteries Service of Delhi is hardly a Test against the United States of Bengal, but it is still enough of a social occasion to out posh frocks and Number One saris. Pavilions, parasols, sunshades ring the scorched grass of the Civil Service of Awadh sports ground, a flock of white wings. Those who can afford portable airco field generators sit in the cool drinking English Pimms Number 1 Cup. The rest fan them-

selves. Incognito in hi-label shades and light silk *dupatta*, Esha Rathore looks at the salt white figures moving on the circle of brown grass and wonders what it is they find so important in their game of sticks and ball to make themselves suffer so.

She had felt hideously self-conscious when she slipped out of the *phat-phat* in her flimsy disguise. Then as she saw the crowds in their *mela* finery milling and chatting, heat rose inside her, the same energy that allowed her to hide behind her performances, seen but unseen. A face half the country sees on its morning *chati* mags, yet can vanish so easily under shades and a headscarf. Slum features. The anonymity of the *basti* bred into the cheekbones, a face from the great crowd.

The Krishna Cops have been put in to bat by Parks and Cemeteries. Thacker is in the middle of the batting order, but Parks and Cemeteries pace bowler Chaudry and the lumpy wicket is making short work of the Department's openers. One on his way to the painted wooden pavilion, and Thacker striding toward the crease, pulling on his gloves, taking his place, lining up his bat. *He is very handsome in his whites*, Esha thinks. He runs a couple of desultory ones with his partner at the other end, then it's; a new over. Clap of ball on willow. A rich, sweet sound. A couple of safe returns. Then the bowler lines and brings his arm round in a windmill. The ball gets a sweet mad bounce. Thacker fixes it with his eye, steps back, takes it in the middle of the bat and drives it down, hard, fast, bounding toward the boundary rope that kicks it into the air for a cheer and a flurry of applause and a four. And Esha is on her feet, hands raised to applaud, cheering. The score clicks over on the big board, and she is still on her feet, alone of all the audience. For directly across the ground, in front of the sight screens, is a tall, elegant figure in black, wearing a red turban.

Him. Impossibly, him. Looking right at her, through the white-clad players as if they were ghosts. And very slowly, he lifts a finger and taps it to his right ear.

She knows what she'll find but she must raise her fingers in echo, feel with horror the coil of plastic overlooked in her excitement to get to the game, nestled accusing in her hair like a snake.

"So, who won the cricket then?"

"Why do you need to ask me? If it were important to you, you'd know. Like you can know anything you really want to."

"You don't know? Didn't you stay to the end? I thought the point of sport was who won. What other reason would you have to follow intra-Civil Service cricket?"

If Puri the maid were to walk into the living room, she would see a scene from a folk tale: a woman shouting and raging at silent dead air. But Puri does her duties and leaves as soon as she can. She's not at ease in a house of *djinns*.

"Sarcasm is it now? Where did you learn that? Some sarcasm aeai you've made part of yourself? So now there's another part of you I don't know, that I'm supposed to love? Well, I don't like it and I won't love it because it makes you look petty and mean and spiteful."

"There are no aeais for that. We have no need for those emotions. If I learned these, I learned them from humans."

Esha lifts her hand to rip away the 'hoek, hurl it against the wall.

"No!"

So far Rao has been voice-only, now the slanting late-afternoon golden light stirs and curdles into the body of her husband.

"Don't," he says. "Don't . . . banish me. I do love you."

"What does that mean?" Esha screams "You're not real! None of this is real! It's just a story we made up because we wanted to believe it. Other people, they have real marriages, real lives, real sex. Real . . . children."

"Children. Is that what it is? I thought the fame, the attention was the thing, that there never would be children to ruin your career and your body. But if that's no longer enough, we can have children, the best children I can buy."

Esha cries out, a keen of disappointment and frustration. The neighbors will hear. But the neighbors have been hearing everything, listening, gossiping. No secrets in the city of djinns.

"Do you know what they're saying, all those magazines and *chati* shows? What they're really saying? About us, the djinn and his wife?"

"I know!" For the first time, A.J. Rao's voice, so sweet, so reasonable inside her head, is raised. "I know what every one of them says about us. Esha, have I ever asked anything of you?"

"Only to dance."

"I'm asking one more thing of you now. It's not a big thing. It's a small thing, nothing really. You say I'm not real, what we have is not real. That hurts me, because at some level it's true. Our worlds are not compatible. But it can be real. There is a chip, new technology, a protein chip. You get it implanted, here." Rao raises his hand to his third eye. "It would be like the 'hoek, but it would always be on. I could always be with you. We would never be apart. And you could leave your world and enter mine. . . ."

Esha's hands are at her mouth, holding in the horror, the bile, the sick vomit of fear. She heaves, retches. Nothing. No solid, no substance, just ghosts and djinns. Then she rips her 'hoek from the sweet spot behind her ear and there is blessed silence and blindness. She holds the little device in her two hands and snaps it cleanly in two.

Then she runs from her house.

Not Neeta not Priya, not snippy Pranh in yts *gharana*, not Madhuri, a smoke-blackened hulk in a life-support chair, and no not never her mother, even though Esha's feet remember every step to her door; never the *basti*. That's death.

One place she can go.

But he won't let her. He's there in the *phatphat*, his face in the palm of her hands, voice scrolling silently in a ticker across the smart fabric: *come back, I'm sorry, come back, let's talk come back, I didn't mean to come back*. Hunched in the back of the little yellow and black plastic bubble she clenches his face into a fist but she can still feel him, feel his face, his mouth next to her skin. She peels the palmer from her hand. His mouth moves silently. She hurls him into the traffic. He vanishes under truck tires.

And still he won't let her go. The *phatphat* spins into Connaught Circus's vast gyratory and his face is on every single one of the video-silk screens hung across the curving facades. Twenty A.J. Rao's, greater, lesser, least, miming in sync.

Esha Esha come back, say the rolling news tickers. *We can try something else. Talk to me. Any ISO, any palmer, anyone. . .*

Infectious paralysis spreads across Connaught Circus. First the people who notice things like fashion ads and *chati*-screens; then the people who notice other people, then the traffic, noticing all the people on the pavements staring up, mouths fly-catching. Even the *phatphat* driver is staring. Connaught Circus is congealing into a clot of traffic: if the heart of Delhi stops, the whole city will seize and die.

"Drive on drive on," Esha shouts at her driver. "I order you to drive." But she abandons the autorickshaw at the end of Sisganj Road and pushes through the clogged traffic the final half-kilometer to Manmohan Singh Buildings. She glimpses Thacker pressing through the crowd, trying to rendezvous with the police motorbike sirening a course through the traffic. In desperation she thrusts up an arm, shouts out his name and rank. At last, he turns. They beat toward each other through the chaos.

"Mrs. Rathore, we are facing a major incursion incident. . . ."

"My husband, Mr. Rao, he has gone mad. . . ."

"Mrs. Rathore, please understand, by our standards, he never was sane. He is an aeai."

The motorbike wails its horns impatiently. Thacker waggles his head to the driver, a woman in police leathers and helmet: *in a moment in a moment*. He seizes Esha's hand, pushes her thumb into his palmer-gloved hand.

"Apartment 1501. I've keyed it to your thumb-print. Open the door to no one, accept no calls, do not use any communications or entertainment equipment. Stay away from the balcony. I'll return as quickly as I can."

Then he swings up onto the pillion, the driver walks her machine round and they weave off into the gridlock.

The apartment is modern and roomy and bright and clean for a man on his own, well furnished and decorated with no signs of a Krishna Cop's work brought home of an evening. It hits her in the middle of the big living-room floor with the sun pouring in. Suddenly she is on her knees on the Kashmiri rug, shivering, clutching herself, bobbing up and down to sobs so wracking they have no sound. This time the urge to vomit it all up cannot be resisted. When it is out of her—not all of it, it will never all come out—she looks out from under her hanging, sweat-soaked hair, breath still shivering in her aching chest. Where is this place? What has she done? How could she have been so stupid, so vain and senseless and blind? Games games, children's pretending, how could it ever have been? I say it is and it is so: look at me! At me!

Thacker has a small, professional bar in his kitchen annex. Esha does not know drink so the *chota peg* she makes herself is much much more gin than tonic but it gives her what she needs to clean the sour, biley vomit from the wool rug and ease the quivering in her breath.

Esha starts, freezes, imagining Rao's voice. She holds herself very still,

listening hard. A neighbor's *tivi*, turned up. Thin walls in these new-built executive apartments.

She'll have another *chota peg*. A third and she can start to look around. There's a spa-pool on the balcony. The need for moving, healing water defeats Thacker's warnings. The jets bubble up. With a dancer's grace she slips out of her clinging, emotionally soiled clothes into the water. There's even a little holder for your *chota peg*. A pernicious little doubt: how many others have been here before me? No, that is his kind of thinking. You are away from that. Safe. Invisible. Immersed. Down in Sisganj Road the traffic unravels. Overhead, the dark silhouettes of the scavenging kites and, higher above, the security robots, expand and merge their black wings as Esha drifts into sleep.

"I thought I told you to stay away from the windows."

Esha wakes with a start, instinctively covers her breasts. The jets have cut out and the water is long-still, perfectly transparent. Thacker is blue-chinned, baggy-eyed and sagging in his rumpled gritty suit.

"I'm sorry. It was just, I'm so glad, to be away . . . you know?"

A bone-weary nod. He fetches himself a *chota peg*, rests it on the arm of his sofa and then very slowly, very deliberately, as if every joint were rusted, undresses.

"Security has been compromised on every level. In any other circumstances it would constitute an i-war attack on the nation." The body he reveals is not a dancer's body; Thacker runs a little to upper body fat, muscles slack, incipient man-tits, hair on the belly hair on the back hair on the shoulders. But it is a body, it is real. "The Bharati government has disavowed the action and waived Aeai Rao's diplomatic immunity."

He crosses to the pool and restarts on the jets. Gin and tonic in hand, he slips into the water with a one-deep, skin-sensual sigh.

"What does that mean?" Esha asks.

"Your husband is now a rogue aeai."

"What will you do?"

"There is only one course of action permitted to us. We will excommunicate him."

Esha shivers in the caressing bubbles. She presses herself against Thacker. She feels his man-body move against her. He is flesh. He is not hollow. Kilometers above the urban stain of Delhi, aeircraft turn and seek.

The warnings stay in place the next morning. Palmer, home entertainment system, com channels. Yes, and balcony, even for the spa.

"If you need me, this palmer is Department-secure. He won't be able to reach you on this." Thacker sets the glove and 'hoek on the bed. Cocooned in silk sheets, Esha pulls the glove on, tucks the 'hoek behind her ear.

"You wear that in bed?"

"I'm used to it."

Varanasi silk sheets and Kama Sutra prints. Not what one would expect of a Krishna Cop. She watches Thacker dress for an excommunication. It's the same as for any job—ironed white shirt, tie, hand-made black shoes—never brown in town—well polished. Eternal riff of bad af-

tershave. The difference: the leather holster slung under the arm and the weapon slipped so easily inside it.

"What's that for?"

"Killing aeais," he says simply.

A kiss and he is gone. Esha scrambles into his cricket pullover, a waif in baggy white that comes down to her knees, and dashes to the forbidden balcony. If she cranes over, she can see the street door. There he is, stepping out, waiting at the curb. His car is late, the road is thronged, the din of engines, car horns and *phatphat* klaxons has been constant since dawn. She watches him wait, enjoying the empowerment of invisibility. *I can see you. How do they ever play sport in these things?* she asks herself, skin under cricket pullover hot and sticky. It's already thirty degrees, according to the weather ticker across the foot of the video-silk shuttering over the open face of the new-built across the street. High of thirty-eight. Probability of precipitation: zero. The screen loops *Town and Country* for those devotees who must have their *soapi*, subtitles scrolling above the news feed.

Hello Esha, Ved Prakash says, turning to look at her.

The thick cricket pullover is no longer enough to keep out the ice.

Now Begum Vora *namastes* to her and says, *I know where you are, I know what you did.*

Ritu Parzaaz sits down on her sofa, pours *chai* and says, *What I need you to understand is, it worked both ways. That 'ware they put in your palmer, it wasn't clever enough.*

Mouth working wordlessly; knees, thighs weak with *basti* girl superstitious fear, Esha shakes her palmer-gloved hand in the air but she can't find the *mudras*, can't dance the codes right. *Call call call call.*

The scene cuts to son Govind at his racing stable, stroking the neck of his thoroughbred über-star Star of Agra. *As they spied on me, I spied on them.*

Dr. Chatterji in his doctor's office. *So in the end we betrayed each other.*

The call has to go through Department security authorization and crypt.

Dr. Chatterji's patient, a man in black with his back to the camera turns. Smiles. It's A.J. Rao. *After all, what diplomat is not a spy?*

Then she sees the flash of white over the rooftops. Of course. Of course. He's been keeping her distracted, like a true *soapi* should. Esha flies to the railing to cry a warning but the machine is tunneling down the street just under power-line height, wings morphed back, engines throttled up: an aeai traffic monitor drone.

"Thacker! Thacker!"

One voice in the thousands. And it is not hers that he hears and turns toward. Everyone can hear the call of his own death. Alone in the hurrying street, he sees the drone pile out of the sky. At three hundred kilometers per hour it takes Inspector Thacker of the Department of Artificial Intelligence Registration and Licensing to pieces.

The drone, deflected, ricochets into a bus, a car, a truck, a *phatphat*, strewing plastic shards, gobs of burning fuel and its small intelligence

across Sisganj Road. The upper half of Thacker's body cartwheels through the air to slam into a hot *samosa* stand.

The jealousy and wrath of djinns.

Esha on her balcony is frozen. *Town and Country* is frozen. The street is frozen, as if on the tipping point of a precipice. Then it drops into hysteria. Pedestrians flee; cycle rickshaw drivers dismount and try to run their vehicles away; drivers and passengers abandon cars, taxis, *phat-phats*; scooters try to navigate through the panic; buses and trucks are stalled, hemmed in by people.

And still Esha Rathore is frozen to the balcony rail. Soap. This is all soap. Things like this cannot happen. Not in the Sisganj Road, not in Delhi, not on a Tuesday morning. It's all computer-generated illusion. It has always been illusion.

Then her palmer calls. She stares at her hand in numb incomprehension. The Department. There is something she should do. Yes. She lifts it in a *mudra*—a dancer's gesture—to take the call. In the same instant, as if summoned, the sky fills with gods. They are vast as clouds, towering up behind the apartment blocks of Sisganj Road like thunderstorms; Ganesh on his rat *vahana* with his broken tusk and pen, no benignity in his face; Siva, rising high over all, dancing in his revolving wheel of flames, foot raised in the instant before destruction; Hanuman with his mace and mountain fluttering between the tower blocks; Kali, skull-jeweled, red tongue dripping venom, scimitars raised, bestriding Sisganj Road, feet planted on the rooftops.

In that street, the people mill. *They can't see this*, Esha comprehends. *Only me, only me*. It is the revenge of the Krishna Cops. Kali raises her scimitars high. Lightning arcs between their tips. She stabs them down into the screen-frozen *Town and Country*. Esha cries out, momentarily blinded as the Krishna Cops hunter-killers track down and excommunicate rogue aeai A.J. Rao. And then they are gone. No gods. The sky is just the sky. The video-silk hoarding is blank, dead.

A vast, godlike roar above her. Esha ducks—now the people in the street are looking at her. All the eyes, all the attention she ever wanted. A tilt-jet in Awadhi air-force chameleo-flage slides over the roof and turns over the street, swiveling engine ducts and unfolding wing-tip wheels for landing. It turns its insect head to Esha. In the cockpit is a faceless pilot in a HUD visor. Beside her a woman in a business suit, gesturing for Esha to answer a call. Thacker's partner. She remembers now.

The jealousy and wrath and djinns.

"Mrs. Rathore, it's Inspector Kaur." She can barely hear her over the scream of ducted fans. "Come downstairs to the front of the building. You're safe now. The aeai has been excommunicated."

Excommunicated.

"Thacker . . ."

"Just come downstairs, Mrs. Rathore. You are safe now, the threat is over."

The tilt-jet sinks beneath her. As she turns from the rail, Esha feels a sudden, warm touch on her face. Jet-swirl, or maybe just a djinn, passing unresting, unhasting, and silent as light.

The Krishna Cops sent us as far from the wrath and caprice of the aeais as they could, to Leh under the breath of the Himalaya. I say *us*, for I existed; a knot of four cells inside my mother's womb.

My mother bought a catering business. She was in demand for weddings and *shaadis*. We might have escaped the aeais and the chaos following Awadh's signing the Hamilton Acts—but the Indian male's desperation to find a woman to marry endures forever. I remember that for favored clients—those who had tipped well, or treated her as something more than a paid contractor, or remembered her face from the *chati* mags—she would slip off her shoes and dance *Radha and Krishna*. I loved to see her do it and when I slipped away to the temple of Lord Ram, I would try to copy the steps among the pillars of the *mandapa*. I remember the brahmins would smile and give me money.

The dam was built and the water war came and was over in a month. The aeais, persecuted on all sides, fled to Bharat where the massive popularity of *Town and Country* gave them protection, but even there they were not safe: humans and aeais, like humans and *djinni*, were too different creations and in the end they left Awadh for another place that I do not understand, a world of their own where they are safe and no one can harm them.

And that is all there is to tell in the story of the woman who married a djinn. If it does not have the happy-ever-after ending of Western fairytales and Bollywood musicals, it has a happy-enough ending. This spring I turn twelve and shall head off on the bus to Delhi to join the *gharana* there. My mother fought this with all her will and strength—for her Delhi would always be the city of djinns, haunted and stained with blood—but when the temple brahmins brought her to see me dance, her opposition melted. By now she was a successful businesswoman, putting on weight, getting stiff in the knees from the dreadful winters, refusing marriage offers on a weekly basis, and in the end she could not deny the gift that had passed to me. And I am curious to see those streets and parks where her story and mine took place, the Red Fort and the sad decay of the Shalimar Gardens. I want to feel the heat of the djinns in the crowded *galis* behind the Jama Masjid, in the dervishes of litter along Chandni Chowk, in the starlings swirling above Connaught Circus. Leh is a Buddhist town, filled with third-generation Tibetan exiles—Little Tibet, they call it—and they have their own gods and demons. From the old Moslem djinn-finder I have learned some of their lore and mysteries but I think my truest knowledge comes when I am alone in the Ram temple, after I have danced, before the priests close the *garbagriha* and put the god to bed. On still nights when the spring turns to summer or after the monsoon, I hear a voice. It calls my name. Always I suppose it comes from the *japa*-softs, the little low-level aeais that mutter our prayers eternally to the gods, but it seems to emanate from everywhere and nowhere, from another world, another universe entirely. It says, *the creatures of word and fire are different from the creatures of clay and water but one thing is true: love endures*. Then as I turn to leave, I feel a touch on my cheek, a passing breeze, the warm sweet breath of djinns. ○

Introduction

Time for us parochial colonists once more to take a short hop across the Pond to learn how our British cousins are doing with the task of running their selected decks of the vast generation ship that is the literature of the fantastic.

(Any books without US editions may, of course, be easily and usually quite reasonably acquired at www.amazon.co.uk, or, in the case of the Tom Holt volume, through www.tralfgarsquarebooks.com.)

A Portrait of the City as A Spook

British authors do not necessarily presuppose essentially British topics or scenes. Witness the case of Patrick McGrath's latest book, *Ghost Town* (Bloomsbury, hardcover, \$16.95, 243 pages, ISBN 1-58234-312-8). This assortment of three original novellas is part of the publisher's series dedicated to great metropoli, and McGrath's chosen burg is New York.

The first story, "The Year of the Gibbet," is told from the vantage of an elderly man in the early 1800s who's dying of cholera. He uses the moment of his mortality to reflect on the pivotal event of his life, which occurred during his childhood, in the year of the American Revolution when the redcoats invaded New York. The year in which his mother was hanged as a spy.

Told in the first person—as are the other two novellas—this tale es-

tablishes the tone, symbology, and style of the whole volume. McGrath is primarily concerned with parent/child relationships, with the shifting, ever-developing character of New York, and with ghosts both literal and metaphorical.

At first "The Year of the Gibbet" paints a vivid picture of colonial New York, with its bustling port and small sprawl of modest buildings. But no sooner is this landscape reified through McGrath's cool but not uncompassionate prose than its equally vibrant destruction by fire and pillage and warfare is depicted. In this devastated new territory the unnamed narrator, his siblings, and their defiant, daring mother try to survive, while still foiling the invaders. As in Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* (1984), the child's viewpoint endows the narrative with an off-kilter feverish quality. Then, through a single act—either sinful or innocent, the reader must decide—the narrator betrays his mother. She is tried and executed, and for the next fifty-five years returns as an objectively real ghost to haunt her son.

The middle piece, "Julius," takes place later in the 1800s, and exhibits a vein of Washington-Irving-style comedy amidst its tragedy. The title character is the absent-minded, weak-willed scion of a rich family, a gentle naïf with pretensions to artistic talent. McGrath's comic portrait of Julius allows his tragic downfall to register even harder. Julius falls in love with an artist's model, but the stern codes of his father demand

a breaking-off of the affair, a cruel action that the father pursues covertly rather than honestly. This parental duplicity results in madness, disfigurement and slow shattered decline for practically the whole extended family. Along the way, we witness the spectacle of a city truly coming into its rich Gilded Age heyday.

Lastly, "Ground Zero" takes place immediately after 9-11. A woman psychiatrist counsels a male patient who's taken up with a struggling female artist who supports herself as a prostitute. The artist's prior lover died in the fall of the WTC, and has returned as a specter, amidst the smoke, fear, and confusion of a new terrorist era. The psychiatrist warns her patient of the madness that awaits him, should he continue to see this obviously unstable woman. But is the psychiatrist herself acting morally? Or does she harbor unprofessional feelings toward her client?

Although each of these superb stories stands confidently on its own, the resonances among them make this book a unified masterpiece. The parallels among all the pairings of domineering parent/impressionable child are the most striking element. (In "Ground Zero," the psychiatrist confesses that she views her patient as the son she never had, thus opening up all kinds of Oedipal issues she ignores.) The theme of hauntings is the next most obvious link. (Julius emerges from twenty years in an asylum as a kind of ghost from a vanished era.) And the tenuous role of the artist in society figures prominently as well. (Julius and Kim Lee, the painter/hooker of "Ground Zero," are obviously akin, while the narrator of "Gibbet" has spent his life as a "hack," a writer.) Finally, the background "documentary" of the rise, fall, rise, and fall of New York City is

a constant sustaining thread. (When, in the final tale, we revisit Trinity Church, a site which figured prominently in "Gibbet," we've completed an eternal circle.)

McGrath's technique is admirably understated and elegant, precise without being over-explicit. He's able to introduce chills unexpectedly and without showiness. A simple statement such as this one from "Gibbet"—"Before me on the table now I have her skull"—does more to evoke the macabre than any splatterpunk SFX. This book is also suffused with a tender melancholy, a kind of O. Henry/Thomas Wolfean godlike view of the suffering million-footed beast that inhabits the USA's greatest city.

Sometimes it takes a foreigner to point out the qualities of a place all the natives take for granted.

The Emperor in Her Head

Brian Aldiss's mastery of his craft is brilliantly on display in his latest Wellsian novel, *Sanity and the Lady* (PS Publishing, hardcover, \$45.00, 218 pages, ISBN 1-904619-24-X). Here's a book that deals with a host of serious topics, which depicts global sociopolitical consternation and a sea-change of history, which ends in what could be arguably construed as a cosmic disaster, yet which does so with a lightness of spirit and a playfulness that carries the reader along frothily and entertainingly. At one point in the narrative, characters praise the show tunes of the 1940s—songs by Cole Porter, et al.—which managed to deal with serious adult topics in a carefree, blithe, yet mordantly rueful way. By this standard, Aldiss is Cole Porter reborn.

It's the day after tomorrow when

an Earth-impacting meteorite seeds portions of our planet with nanoscopic alien invaders, who come to be called "emperors" or "autons." These invaders (possibly bits and pieces of an ancient alien AI) take up residence in the brains of random citizens in the UK, the USA, and France. (Note immediately the satirical possibilities in the choice of these three particular nations.) The autons begin a conversation with their hosts, seeking to learn the most basic things about the strange new world on which they've inadvertently arrived. (In these dialogues, Aldiss has great fun questioning everything we take for granted, much in the manner of Heinlein's Michael Valentine Smith.)

The three governments involved react in fashions typical of their traditions. The US President orders all autons and their hosts sacrificed for the good of mankind, on the off-chance that the autons are hostile. The French savor and protect the newcomers. The British reaction lies somewhere in between.

Our focus for all this interstellar brouhaha is Laura Broughton, a middle-aged novelist who becomes a public defender of the autons (she carries one) and the possibilities they offer, such as a deeper understanding of the universe. (The fact that an auton has cured her grandmother of a fatal illness doesn't hurt either.) Her principled stand brings her to France, Canada, the USA and 10 Downing Street. But she accumulates enemies along the way, and is soon in jeopardy. At the climax of the book, she and her auton retaliate in the only way they know how. What results is an unpredictable twist ending.

Aldiss has great fun depicting Laura's eccentric extended family (they all share a huge country house

in a Wodehouse manner). His delight in their quotidian affairs—high tea, dogs at play, amateur drama productions—is a perfect foil to the grander themes and doings. His text argues convincingly that all our high-flown rhetoric must be embedded in the day-to-day realities of living, which perhaps ultimately outweigh the cosmological concerns.

Like Poul Anderson's *Brainwave* (1954) or John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), this novel shakes up the status quo with an eruption from the great beyond, simultaneously showing us how little mankind figures in the spacetime continuum, and yet how unique and irreplaceable we are, while advocating general humor and a certain strain of don't-take-yourself-so-seriously as the essential survival tactics.

Pack Your Own Lunch

Here's an interesting question for you: is every book that features a teenaged protagonist necessarily a Young Adult novel? Is Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)? I'm inclined to think not; that having a youthful hero or heroine does not automatically stamp a book as something geared solely toward juveniles. But the marketplace may disagree.

This is possibly why Graham Joyce's newest—something of a departure for him, in both tone and focus—is not labeled a YA book, although it features a sixteen-year-old boy at its heart, and could conceivably have been slanted toward that demographic. There's too much emotional and intellectual substance here to exclude any potential reader, of whatever age group.

Joyce's novel, *TWOC* (PS Publish-

ing, hardcover, \$45.00, 205 pages, ISBN 1-904619-37-1), purports to tell a very simple story at the outset. But the story delivers a hidden curveball, plotwise, and also some very rich lessons that its straightforward surface might not immediately suggest.

The title stems from an acronym: Taken Without Owner's Consent. It's a British police term for the habit of young criminals of "borrowing" cars for joyrides. Our hero, Matt Norris, is a "twocer." And one of his stunts has irreparably damaged his life. He and his brother Jake, and Jake's girl Jools, were cruising in a stolen car when they got into a fiery accident. Jake died, Jools got scarred for life, and Matt's hands were burnt. Now Matt has to deal with the aftermath. He's on probation and doing poorly in school. He bristles with his parents. He's alienated his old friends. Oh, and one other thing.

Jake's ghost likes to hover over Matt's shoulder, in front of his face, outside his bedroom window, whispering a seductive chant of mortality, an invitation to join Jake in the grim afterlife.

Matt seems to be on a downward spiral, until his counselor suggests a harsh, survival-style weekend retreat. There, with an arsonist named Amy and a graffiti-artist named Gilb, Matt will have to confront his demons. But Jake might be too strong to defeat.

Joyce spels out Matt's story in the engaging first-person, creating an utterly convincing character and voice. Some of Matt's witticisms are perhaps a hair too sharp and polished, but when you add in the revealed fact that Matt always did best in English classes, you can buy his keen lines more easily. After a short time, you just accept that this

is his voice. And it's a swell voice for rendering events and presenting Matt's impressions of all the adults and his fellow juvenile delinquents, sardonic yet hurt.

The horror aspect of Matt's situation is not as intense as in Joyce's other books, but it's still omnipresent and creepy enough to stir the hackles, especially in the nail-biting climax. More dominant, however, are the comedic aspects of Matt's life, and here Joyce proves himself deft. Like the Aldiss book reviewed above, this novel hews to a healthy "laugh to stop from crying" philosophy.

At the end of his pivotal weekend, Matt is asked to sum up what he's learned in a motto. "Pack your own lunch" is what he spontaneously comes up with. As a metaphor for taking personal responsibility for one's own life and actions, this holds the ring of hard-earned truth. Matt's victory—shared with his peers—resonates for both him and the lucky reader.

Family Feud

We encounter a futuristic or alternate world that is dominated by an outright tyranny, or subject to some other inequitable system. Rebels exist. A child of privilege is yanked out of his cozy world and made to encounter the proletariat. He sees the error of his coddled ways, perhaps even with the help of a beautiful rebel girl. The fortunate, reformed scion now works to help undermine the very system that once ensured his status.

This hoary formula is as old as the notion of warp-drive in science fiction. It formed the basis for hundreds of tales during the *Galaxy* era. I even seem to recall Damon Knight making

fun of the plot in a critical essay. Surely no good tale could be written to this template nowadays. . . ?

Well, that's what I would have said before reading James Lovegrove's *Provender Gleed* (Gollancz, trade paperback, £12.99, 331 pages, ISBN 0-575-07684-4), which manages to employ this ancient narrative pattern to wondrous effect. Of course, it helps that Lovegrove's novel is basically a humorous one—admittedly with a moral sting in its tail—since any utterly serious treatment of this “great man from above seeing the error of his ways and turning his coat” McGuffin would have faced greater barriers to acceptance.

In any case, here's Lovegrove's clever iteration of this fairy tale.

Technically, *Provender Gleed* is an alternate history novel, first and foremost. The disjunction between our world and Lovegrove's occurred in the 1600s, when the Medici and Borgia families united into a powerful cartel. With this example before them, major powerful clans around the globe followed suit, becoming capital-eff Families, the not-so-secret rulers of the globe. These Families are mostly idolized by the hoi polloi, as the celebrity members go about their wastrel lives. But of course, some underlings feel hatred and envy for their overlords.

Cut to the present day. One dominant British Family is the Gleeds. The improbably named Provender is their only son, the heir to the name. But Provender is not living up to his responsibilities. He's moony and uncooperative. In secret, he's the author of an anti-Family tract. But this mild act of dissention does him no good when two proles—Damien Scrase and Isis Necker—kidnap Provender during a giant celebra-

tion at his estate. The two intend to hold him for ransom. But what they don't realize is that Provender's father, Prosper, is convinced that a rival Polish Family, the Kuczynskis, is behind the kidnapping. Bent on revenge, the Gleeds begin using their government pawns to provoke what could easily become the Third World War.

Provender must somehow convince Isis, the more sympathetic of his two captors, to help him escape. Then he must make his way back across a hostile landscape to home, never realizing that home harbors a traitor who was the ultimate mover in this scheme.

Lovegrove has a grand old time setting up his faintly ridiculous but fully embraceable world. The way his Families live, and the way their “ClanFans” idolize them is a cutting parallel to our own celebrity-besotted culture. There's a little bit of Gilliam-esque alternate technology on show—dirigibles, odd trams, and computer analogues—but basically Lovegrove's most concerned with the social relationships of his uchronia. His “common people” are just as fully rounded as his stars, and Isis becomes a great foil for Provender.

Lovegrove's plummy dialogue and daft descriptions follow the core practices of British drollery, in the Pratchett or Holt mode, with maybe a bit of Wilde or Firbank thrown in for good measure (For Holt's latest, see below.) A description of the business quarters of a pair of “Anagrammatic Detectives” (themselves the best and funniest bit players in the book) relies heavily on the silliness of the word “insalubrious” without becoming tedious or boring. The public spat between Prosper Gleed and Stanislaw Kuczynski at the Family Congress has the gleefully

demented air of a Marx Brothers skit. All in all, this book rides a wave of quiet chuckles that occasionally crests into loud guffaws.

Yet in the end, Lovegrove manages to say something true and useful about class privilege, elitism, and social reform. Imagine Ron Goulart channeling William Morris or Edward Bellamy, and you'll have an idea of this book's delights.

A Jolly Treacle

I wish that I had encountered the first two books in the fascinatingly barmy saga of Paul Carpenter—*The Portable Door* (2003) and *In Your Dreams* (2004)—before unwittingly venturing onto the third volume, *Earth, Air, Fire and Custard* (Orbit, hardcover, £12.99, 410 pages, ISBN 1-84149-281-7). Oh, it's not that this latest Holt masterpiece of recompiled humorous fantasy is incomprehensible without first reading its predecessors. Quite to the contrary. Holt does a fine job of filling in the backstory in bits and pieces as he goes along. Most satisfying. No, it's only this: now that I know all the secrets concerning Paul's genesis, existence, identity, and destiny, I can never read the first two volumes with the same teasing feeling of enigmas awaiting unveiling as I could have, had I been a naïve reader encountering them for the first time in their proper order. Now, when I go to them out of sequence, as I surely shall, purely for pleasure, I'll be like the hidden villain of the series, Professor Theo Van Spee: omniscient to the point of stultification and boredom.

Well, not actual boredom. You never get that with a Holt book. But you take my meaning.

All in all though, I suppose I did get to sample the choicest, climactic bits first. Rather like picking the fruit out of your Jell-O.

But enough about me and desserts.

Back to Paul Carpenter and his custard.

Paul is a part-goblin, mostly human fellow who's been indentured to a London firm of magicians (some goblin, some not) named J.W. Wells. During his tenure at the company—which makes money by rearranging reality for its clients—Paul has been assaulted in various painful ways, forced to visit the afterlife, sexually harassed by one lascivious goblinette, and generally treated like dirt. Moreover, he's lost the affections of his one true love, Sophie Pettin-gell, thanks to a spell cast upon her. In short, Paul's life is looking pretty miserable. Even being apprenticed to Professor Van Spee, where's he learning some nifty tricks, such as how to nudge an Earth-killer asteroid out of its orbit, fails to lift his spirits.

Then a new partner arrives at the firm, the mysterious Frank Laertides. Laertides takes Paul under his wing for non-obvious reasons, and before Paul knows it, his life has gone from bad to worse. He's accused of murdering a co-worker; he's trapped in Custardspace, a synthetic reality created by Van Spee; he's forced to fight duels and deal with covetous goblins; his sentient refrigerator becomes uppity and lecturesome; and that's just the beginning of Paul's trials. Will he find the strength of character to win out against the vast conspiracy that's using him as a pawn? Perhaps. After all, as he resolves, about three-quarters of the way through this book: "There comes a point where the reasonable man, even if he's a born coward, has to

draw the line against the insweeping tide of weirdness. . . ."

Holt's many talents are fully on display in this absurd, surreal comedy. Let's consider them one by one.

First is his sheer power of language. With his gaudy, wacky metaphors and similes, he constructs nets of hilarious language that carry the reader along gleefully. When Paul takes up a magic sword, for instance, he finds that the weapon "was tugging at his fingers, like a small child who's just sighted chocolate." Not only is this vivid and tangible, but we know we're not exactly in Elric of Melniboné territory. Included in this facility is Holt's glorious dialogue, which skitters about the page insanely and at cross-purposes to itself. The archetypical misunderstandings of great comedy flourish here.

Holt's ceaseless prolificacy of plotting is energizing as well. There's a wealth of sheer incident in this book that would furnish up six lesser novels. At two points in this story, things become so complicated that both Professor Van Spee and Frank Laertides have to spend about ten pages in explanation of the tangled threads of events (the book involves time travel, alternate history, and various paradoxes as well as magic). But their infodumps, being written with typical Holt vivacity, don't become stale or tedious.

Lastly, one has to admire Holt's worldview. His take on life involves a piquant, paradoxical mix of cynicism and optimism, hope and dread, love and hate, compassion and disdain. (He identifies the two factors that motivate most human responses to whatever situation they find themselves in as embarrassment and fear.) In the end, exactly like our universe, where a slight initial im-

balance between matter and anti-matter resulted in everything we see today, Holt's positivity triumphs, just barely, over the innate negativity of mortal existence.

The favorite TV show of the goblin race is identified as Benny Hill's dumb and rude comedy stylings. There's a decided tinge of Hill's stoopid anarchy in Holt's novels, but elevated to a much higher plane by Holt's verbal and metaphysical cleverness. (It's that thin line between clever and stupid, identified by the rockers of Spinal Tap, that separates them.) Like Christopher Moore here in the USA, Holt takes everyday people, slices them open, and exposes their essential core of non-rational eccentricity and weirdness by placing them in fantastically scenarios.

Holt has a character say of Paul's boss, "Dennis Tanner is incapable of happiness . . . It just sort of soaks away into him like water in the desert." Quite to the contrary, Holt himself is incapable of not giving joy: it bursts out of him like a fountain in the wilderness.

The Museum of Tears

It's always a glorious mystery to me, how a book can be utterly unique and incomparable, and yet still resonate with its literary cousins. It's like siblings who exhibit shared familial traits while still remaining unmistakably individual.

Thus I find that in reading Rupert Thomson's magnificent *Divided Kingdom* (Knopf, hardcover, \$24.95, 334 pages, ISBN 1-4000-4218-6), I am put in mind, at various points, of such writers as John Crowley and J.G. Ballard; Paul Park and Jeffrey Ford; Kate Wilhelm and Carol

Emshwiller; Gene Wolfe and Ian McEwan; Michael Bishop and Ray Bradbury. If this stellar list connotes high praise, then so be it: that was my intent. Thomson has created a tale here that's far above the commonplace, worthy of inclusion with *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) or *The Physionomy* (1997) or "In Blue."

Divided Kingdom consists of ten chapters. Herewith, a brief synopsis.

Part One opens with the swift and believable introduction of the premise that drives the whole tale, the speculation about which you willing suspend your disbelief, and from which all else logically and unstoppably flows. Sometime in the near future, succumbing to societal pressures (pressures that are all too real, as witness the actual French riots of late 2005), Great Britain transforms itself into four separate polities, based not on religion or race, but on the four humors of classical learning. The Yellow Quarter is to hold all the choleric types; the Blue Quarter will shelter the phlegmatics; the Green Quarter will contain the melancholics; and the Red Quarter will be graced by the sanguines (who tend to consider themselves the elite). Unclassifiabes become a pariah caste, the White People. The whole population is psychologically tested and assigned to new homes in the designated lands, thus splitting up families and friends.

Our hero, our narrator, is torn away as a child from his parents. His name is changed to Thomas Parry, and he's deemed a sanguine. He's given a new father, Victor, and a new sister, Marie. We watch him adapt with the traumatized flexibility of youth to his new circumstances. But scars encyst him mentally. Twenty years go by. He's now an adult in his early thirties, working for a Red

Quarter government ministry, seemingly a loyal drone.

Part Two finds Thomas being given an assignment: to attend an academic conference in the Blue Quarter. He accepts with some trepidation, scared of the bogeymen that inhabit the foreign land. But in the city of Aquaville, Thomas will encounter an epiphany that shatters his complacency and false sense of self. There comes an official side jaunt to the Yellow Quarter in Part Four. Here a terrorist attack that sows general confusion gives the altered Thomas the perfect excuse to run away from his old life. He begins a desperate hegira across the Yellow Quarter, encountering both good and bad people. By Part Five, he's back in the Blue lands, where he thinks he can fashion a new life. But he's caught by the authorities, re-tested and re-assigned to the Green empire. He sinks into lethargy, but is finally moved to flee once more, this time impersonating a White Person. Part Seven finds him living the nomadic, almost pre-rational existence of these outcasts, before he finds his life endangered in a pogrom. He's rescued by a mysterious woman named Odell Burfoot, who helps him back to the Red Quarter in Parts Eight and Nine. Once home, Thomas learns the hidden, conspiratorial dimensions of his odyssey. Part Ten is a small coda that points toward a hopeful future, perhaps with Odell.

Thomson's beautiful, elegaic, symbolic, and acutely palpable language weaves a subcreation as vivid as, say, Wolfe's far future of the New Sun. He makes us believe that the passage of two decades can turn the familiar British Isles into something out of Orwell by way of Paul Park. (But Thomson is not intent on creating anything so simple as a polemi-

cal dystopia. His creation is too multivalent, the guilt too evenly shared by all for mere monitory finger-pointing.) Part of Thomson's magic stems from the wonderful names of the people and places he chooses. Can you imagine anything more perfect than a wasteland town named "Pyrexia, a city that manufactured chlorine, plastics and petrochemicals . . ."? The whole divided kingdom is fashioned of colorful bits like this, producing a mosaic that's reminiscent of something unearthed by archaeologists. Despite the relative youth of the new lands, they reek of decay, desuetude and despair. (The Green Quarter even boasts a Museum of Tears, where the sorrowful exudates of the citizenry are kept in rows of tiny vials.)

The psyche of Thomas Parry is rich and complex enough also to sustain his travelogue. We can empathize utterly with him, from the moment he's ripped away from his parents, through the years when he wears an armor of indifference, and into his glorious, albeit confused awakening. His observations on his warped culture keep pace with his hard education, until finally at the end he's attained a kind of wordless wisdom. (As a White Person, he literally forsakes speech, for a kind of communal mentality reminiscent of that in John Varley's "The Persistence of Vision.")

Thomson's tale features many allusions to realworld touchstones. The Berlin Wall is one such, evident in the walls that divide the Quarters. The division of North and South Korea that shattered families is another. And Cambodia's descent into Year Zero killing fields, as well as Mao's Cultural Revolution, rise up like echoes and shadows as well. This is a book that is both a bildungsroman and a novel of ideas, concerned with both the freedom of the individual and the fates of nations: two things that in the end are not separate.

A smuggler named Fernandez helps to educate Thomas by telling him this: "What was so clever about the way they divided us . . . was that it more or less guaranteed that we would hate each other. . . . It's like racism. . . . The new racism is psychological. What's strange is, we seem to need it—to thrive on it. If we don't have someone to despise, we feel uncomfortable, we feel we haven't properly defined ourselves."

In this day and age of polarization, of shouting across ideological walls at each other, the moral of Thomson's vibrant, touching novel of estrangement—estrangement from each other, estrangement from one's self, estrangement from humanity as a whole—couldn't be more timely and necessary to apprehend. ○



SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Here comes Memorial Day, the biggest convention weekend of the year. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me atcons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

MAY 2006

18-21—Book Expo America. For info, write: 383 Main Ave., Norwalk CT 06851. Or phone: (800) 368-9000 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) bookexpo.reedexpo.com. (E-mail) cmcabe@reedexpo.com. Con will be held in: Washington DC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Convention Center. Guests will include: over 500 authors. Book trade only.

19-21—Monster Mania. monstermania.net. Cherry Hill NJ (near Philadelphia PA). George A. Romero. Horror Film.

19-21—MobiCon. Mobicon.org. Ashbury Hotel, Mobile AL. Billy West, Ellen Muth, Jody Lynn Nye.

19-21—KeyCon. (204) 669-6053. keycon.org. Radisson, Winnipeg MB. Ruth Thompson, Barron Vangor Toth.

26-28—MarCon. marcon.org. Hyatt, Columbus OH. George R.R. Martin, Jody Lee, Dave & Judith Hayman, Bill Roper.

26-29—BayCon. baycon.org. Doubletree, San Jose CA. L. Niven, J. Pournelle, J. Burns, C. Miller, J.S. Daugherty.

26-28—Oasis. oasfs.org. Orlando FL. S. Brust, E. Mitchell, C. Ulbrich, P. Anthony, B. Bova, R.L. Byers, J. McDewitt.

26-28—ConDuit. (801) 776-0164. conduit.sfcon.org. Sheraton, Salt Lake City UT. Bob Eggleton, L.E. Modesitt Jr.

26-29—MisCon. (406) 544-7083. miscon.org. Ruby's Inn, Missoula MT. Jerry Olition, Frank Wu, Dragon Dronet.

26-28—Anime Boston. animeboston.com. Hynes Convention Center & Sheraton Boston Hotel, Boston MA. Huge event.

26-28—FanimeCon. fanime.com. help@fanime.com. Convention Center, San Jose CA. Guests to be announced. Anime.

26-28—Anime North. animenorth.com. info@animenorth.com. Doubletree Int'l. Plaza Hotel, Toronto ON. Macek, Asami.

26-28—Animazement. (919) 941-5050. animazement.org. information@animazement.org. Sheraton, Durham NC. Anime.

26-29—BaltCon. (410) 563-3727. balticon.org. Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Gaiman, Wolfe, Snellings-Clark.

26-29—ConQuest. kcsiencefiction.org. tmajkol@mindspring.com. Airport Hilton, Kansas City MO. Guests TBA.

26-29—WisCon. sf3.org/wiscon. Concourse Hotel, Madison WI. K. Wilhelm, J. Yolen. Feminist SF con marks 30 years.

26-29—CostumeCon. cc24.dmsfs.org. Hotel Ft. Des Moines, Des Moines IA. Big annual costumers' meet. "Epic Movies."

JUNE 2006

2-4—ConCarolinas, Box 9100, Charlotte NC 28299. concarolinas.org. Marriott. Spider & Jeanne Robinson.

3-4—ColoniaCon, c/o J. O.M. J. GbR, Röntgenstr. 79, Kerpen-Türnich 50169, Germany. coloniacon2006.de. Köln.

9-11—A-Kon, 3352 Broadway Blvd. #470, Garland TX 75043. a-kon.com. Dallas TX. Commercial anime, etc., event.

9-12—ConFlux, Box 903, Belconnen ACT 2616, Australia. (0421) 005 511. conflux.org.au. Canberra. Ellen Datlow.

15-18—AnthroCon, Box 476, Malvern PA 19355. anthrocon.org. Westin Convention Center, Philadelphia PA. Furies.

16-18—Locus Awards Weekend, Box 13305, Oakland CA 94661. locusmag.com. SF Hall of Fame, Seattle WA. Willis.

16-18—GaylaxiCon, 1206 Dunfield Ave #44, Toronto ON M4S 2H2. gaylacticnetwork.org. For gay fans, and friends.

16-18—ConCertino, 18 Cottage Av., Arlington MA 02474. concertino.net. Whitaker, Crowell. SF/fantasy folksinging.

16-18—Anime Next, Box 1088, Pearl River NY 10965. animenext.org. Meadowlands Expo Center, Secaucus NJ.

23-25—MidWestCon, 5627 Antoninus Dr., Cincinnati OH 45238. (513) 922-3234. cflg.org. Sharonville OH. Relax-a-con.

23-25—ApolloCon, Box 541822, Houston TX 77254. apollocon.org. Artist Alain Viesca, Ian Tim Miller (GoH: TBA).

23-25—HyperCon, 6001 Old Hickory Blvd. #411, Hermitage TN 37076. hypercon.info. Days Inn, Nashville TN.

23-26—German National Con. members.aol.com/sfcl. sfcl@aol.com. Tube Youth Center, Lübeck. James P. Hogan

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AUGUST ISSUE

Renowned British writer **Brian Stableford** returns next issue with our lead story for August, a sleek and playful new novella, chock-full of the kind of dazzling conceptualization that Stableford is known for, that takes us aloft on an ethership designed by the eminent alchemist John Dee, in company with Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, Edward de Vere, and others of a distinguished company of adventurers, who set out to explore "The Plurality of Worlds"—with the survival of our *own* world ultimately at stake! Don't miss it!

ALSO IN AUGUST

Hugo-, Nebula-, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** takes us to Venus for a deadly game of cat-and-mouse played out across the inimical surface of a "Tin Marsh"; new writer **Ruth Nestvold** offers us a compassionate portrait of a lost and wistful young woman visiting a foreign land who finds a whole lot *more* there than the usual tourist attractions, in "Feather and Ring"; British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxler** sweeps us along on a dangerous voyage that plunges us just about as deep "In the Abyss of Time" as it's possible to *get*, with some cosmic surprises waiting at The End of Days; Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** explains the dangers of compassion, as she signs us up for a crash course with "Crunchers, Inc."; and **Alexander Jablokov**, returning after much too long an absence, invites us to go on the road and on the run with a "Dead Man," in a taut and exciting story that demonstrates how your problems may only be *beginning* after you kick the bucket.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column continues his investigation in "The Thumb on the Dinosaur's Nose: 2"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly's** "On The Net" column hands us a box of popcorn and invites us to sit back and settle in to take a look at "Son of Movies"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our August issue on sale at your newsstand on June 27, 2006. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

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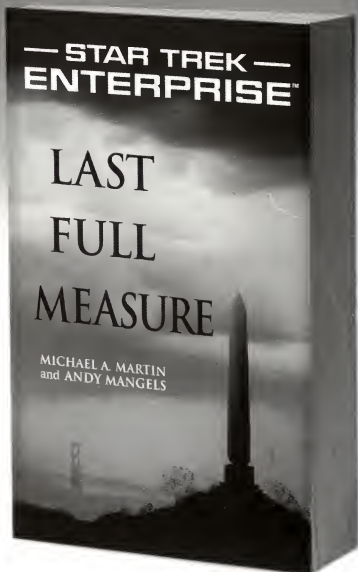
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